



YEAR *of* PLENTY

One Suburban Family, Four Rules, and 365 Days of
Homegrown Adventure in Pursuit of Christian Living

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STUDY GUIDE

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A note from the author about how to use this study guide

This guide was created by the small group ministry team of Millwood Presbyterian Church (Special thanks to Josh Terry, who crafted most of this version of the study, and Doug Sadler). It is designed with church-based small groups in mind and it has been road tested by several groups at Millwood who read the book and worked through the themes and questions in the study. This trial run included a wide variety of groups, from young adults to young retirees, and in our experience, there was always plenty of lively discussion regardless of the group demographic.

Each session is broken into two basic sections. The first section focuses on responding to the reading. For some groups, it might be enough for the leader to simply say, “What did you think of this week’s reading?” For other groups that need more prompting there are a series of general and focused questions to draw from. Please note that there are far more questions listed than you’ll need. I would encourage leaders to read through each week’s questions and select a few to focus on, while being prepared to pull in additional questions if necessary.

The second section of each study is an exploration of a Bible passage or passages. Again, there is more offered than most groups can cover in one discussion. Each week there are at least 2 key scripture passages (except week 1 which is weighted more toward group sharing) that are either taken directly from the book’s narrative or are relevant to the topics raised by the book. I recommend choosing one Bible passage to focus on each week. In some cases, notes and commentary are offered to help guide the Bible study discussion. It may be helpful to hand out or email copies of the study for people to read ahead of time. You are free to distribute this study via pdf and/or print as many copies as you need.

The study is written to accommodate six group sessions. Given the range of issues raised by the book and the excess material in the study it wouldn’t be difficult to stretch this study out over several additional weeks. Feel free to edit and revise the study as you wish. If you come up with a different version with a different length send me a copy and I’ll make it available to others.

While the study is designed with church small groups in mind, I think there is potential for non-church or non-faith-affiliated book groups to utilize the questions and prompts in this study. I have always approached the issues raised in the book as a community conversation rather than an exclusively Christian conversation.

Finally, I have an offer to any groups that go through this study. If you are interested, I am willing, at no charge, to have a conversation with your group at the end of your journey together. This could be a conference call or a Skype call, or if you’re in the vicinity of the Inland Northwest I’d be glad to visit in person. I’m eager to hear about your experiences.

I am also available for speaking engagements including retreats, conferences, and worship services. You can contact me at craig@millwoodpc.org for inquiries.

Blessings to you and your group,

Craig

Year of Plenty Small Group Discussion Guide Session #1

Have group participants read Chapter 1 (24 pages) in preparation for this week's discussion.

Leaders: For sections 2 and 3 it may be helpful to have a large tablet or poster size sheet of paper to write out your ideas for later comparison.

Section 1 - Responding to the Reading

General Questions:

- What is the big idea or issue in the chapter?
- Which personal story touched you, and with what affect?
- What do you agree or disagree with?
- What questions are raised for you?

Focused Questions:

- The author and his wife both expressed discontent with their consumer lives that was finally triggered and released by their last Christmas present purchase. Do you relate to their experience and agree that somehow things are not right? Or are you surprised by their emotional response? (Taken from page 2)
- How do you respond to the thought that our culture is programming and pushing us to mindlessly consume more and more? (Taken from Page 3)
- Do you see any winds of change taking place in your consumer experiences? Maybe there have been new events or relationships that have deeper personal meaning for you. (Taken from Page 6)
- What currently guides your decisions about what to buy and what not to buy? Are you intentional about your purchases or are you just doing “what you have always done”? (Taken from page 15)
- What is your reaction to the four rules (local, used, homegrown, homemade) the Goodwin's chose? Which of the four rules is most provocative for you? If you were going to undertake a consumption experiment, what rules would you choose?
- What do you think about the Thailand rule? If you picked one international location to consume items from, what country would you choose? What items are available from that region?

Section 2 – Reflections on Consumer Habits

General Questions:

- Describe your experiences with our “consumer culture.” What are the dominant aspects of our “consumer culture?” How does it affect you? What are its blessings? What are its curses?

Have someone keep notes on a large sheet of paper during this brainstorming session. If the group gets stalled trying to answer the question, then use the follow-up questions below for help.

Focused Questions:

- What does it mean to be a consumer? Is it inherently good or bad to be a consumer? Is it possible not to be a consumer?
- In what ways is our consumer-culture acting like an idol or a god? What benefits are we told we will receive through advertising and the promise of the next purchase?
- What communication methods are used to promote our need to purchase more? How many of our six senses are spoken to? What benefit are we enticed with?
- What are the rules of the game you feel are being imposed on you?
- What experiences of community and personal relationship, of adventure and creativity are we missing out on by having what we need readily provided for us?
- What negative consequences and losses do we experience by consuming too much?

Section 3 – Bible Exploration

Read Matthew 13:1-9 & 18-23 (The Parable of the Sower)

- In the passage Jesus describes different soil conditions. How does our consumer culture influence the soil conditions in our lives? Does it impact our receptivity to God's work in our lives? Does it impact our fruitfulness?

Rodney Clapp describes the influence of consumer culture on Christian faith in a way that is similar to the weedy, thorny patch of soil (quoted on page 59 of *Year of Plenty*). He writes:

All its elements are not simply good or bad. It is pervasive in both grossly obvious and infinitely subtle ways. It is profoundly rooted in faith, culture, and society as we now know them. To the degree it is toxic, it is an ivy in the garden with its tendrils wrapped around and through our most beautiful flowers and our most essential vegetables. It could not be violently or wholly extirpated without destroying much that we rightly prize and protect. But just like such a vining plant it has grown too abundant and thick, so that it is now choking the life out of precious flowers and indispensable vegetables. Christians and other people of faith are among those who must gird themselves for a long, intricate, and difficult pruning.¹

- One way to look at the Goodwin's experiment is that they were pruning the influences of their consumer lives, hoping to cultivate better soil for their faith to grow and be fruitful. What are some influences of your consume life that need this kind of pruning?

Optional Group Experiment:

The Goodwins have said that their goal with the book is not that everyone should follow their rules, but rather that their story would spark others to try out their own life-giving rules and consumption experiments.

During the six weeks of this study (or whatever the timeline for your group) have everyone choose one rule for consumption that they want to follow. Your rules don't have to be as comprehensive as the Goodwins. Here are some examples to get the creative juices flowing:

- Buy coffee beans from a local coffee roaster.
- Buy meat and/or eggs from local, small-scale farmers.
- Make your own ice cream instead of buying store-bought.
- Shop weekly at the local farmers' market and get to know a farmer.
- Grow some short-season plants like lettuce or radishes that will be ready for harvest at the end of the group.

For Next Time: Lesson 2 will focus on "Section I: Winter" and Chapters 2 through 4. (40 pages)

¹ Rodney Clapp, *The Consuming Passion: Christianity & the Consumer Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 12.

Year of Plenty Small Group Discussion Guide Session #2

Have group participants read “Section I: Winter” and Chapters 2 through 4 (40 pages) in preparation for this week’s discussion.

This session will focus on the intersection of Christian faith and consumption. It will lead the group to reflect on how our consumption is informed by faith – or not – and in what ways faith practice is undermined by patterns of consumption.

Section 1: Responding to the Reading

General Questions:

- What are the big ideas or issues in these chapters that jumped out to you?
- Which personal story resonated with your experiences?
- Which story or reflection challenged you?
- What do you agree or disagree with?

Focused Questions:

Knowing Where Food Comes From

- On page 27, the author talks about the confusing matrix of where our food comes from. For example, apple juice may be made from apples from the United States, but laced with ascorbic acid made in China. Have you ever thought about where your food comes from? If so, what have you discovered?
- On page 32, the author says the best part of their experiment was the relationships they developed with people in the supply chain of local goods. Why should knowing where our food comes from or who produces or grows our food matter to us?
- On page 48, the author describes how, in less than a generation, we’ve lost touch with many of the agricultural practices that people have participated in for millennia. Do you think there is a problem with this shift in society? Explain some of your thoughts on this topic.

Scarcity & Abundance

- On page 45, the author writes:

We had been operating out of a sense of scarcity: scarcity of time and money, scarcity of energy and emotional availability. We woke up every morning feeling the burden of these scarce resources and were driven by this, shaped by this perpetual shortage, like there was some hidden embargo somewhere that mucked up the works.

- Can you relate to that experience? Where do you feel the most pressing sense of scarcity in your life? How does that shape your experiences and perspectives? What role does consumer marketing have in reinforcing this idea of economic scarcity?
- The author lifts up the Christian story as an alternative to this narrative of oppressive scarcity. He quotes from the book, *Divine Economy*, that states:

God's inexhaustible plenitude suggests that we need not try to consume creation as our own. We need not cling to creaturely life, nor seek to flee from it. Instead, its desires can be properly ordered. This plenitude invites us to learn to participate in God's own perfections, in a simplicity of life that rejoices in cooperation and gift rather than in conquest, competition and acquisition.²

- What might this kind of “simplicity” look like? Are there Christian traditions or examples of simplicity that come to mind?
- In what ways does our dependence on God’s provision make us secure and comfortable with the ideas of simplicity and abundance?

Christian Consumers

- On page 59, the author states “The greatest gift the church has to offer its neighbors is to recognize them as something other than customers.” Is there any merit to integrating Christianity and consumerism? Historically, has the Church made mistakes by using consumer tactics? What are some examples of God working to draw people to Himself, and how can we model His examples in our relationships?

Section 2 – Bible Exploration

Read Genesis 1:26-31 – Focus on Rest and Sabbath

- On page 21, the author states, “Imagine awaking for this first day with the longest to-do list ever devised hanging on the fridge, and God says, ‘First, we rest.’” What is the significance of God’s command to rest? How does that relate to consumption and simplicity?
- The author recognized the benefit of slowing down, waiting, and recognizing their current patterns of consumption (p. 22). Have you experienced a time where it was better to step back and wait before starting an undertaking? What did you discover during that time of waiting? What were the benefits or drawbacks that you and others may have experienced?

² D. Stephen Long, *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

Read James 5:1-6 – “Who are the rich oppressors.”

- What was the problem with the rich oppressors’ actions in this Scripture passage?
- In a globalized economy, what role do we play as American consumers? What traps exist in our culture that would pull us into a “rich oppressors” category?
- If I wear a T-shirt made by enslaved children in a poor country, does that make me a “rich oppressor?” If I eat vegetables harvested by people who are abused and mistreated...? If I drink coffee from coffee beans grown by a farmer in Columbia who is not paid a fair wage...? Is it enough to say, “I didn’t know any better?”
- Who are the rich oppressors today?

Read Matthew 6:25-34 – “Consider the lilies...”

- How can Jesus’ words here be a guide in our consumer lives?
- Based on the Matthew passage, what should our focus be? Explain how this may or may not help to alleviate some of your fears and concerns.

For Next Time: Lesson 3 will focus on “Section II: Spring” and Chapters 5 through 8. (60 pages)

Year of Plenty Small Group Discussion Guide Session #3

Have group members read “Section II: Spring” and Chapters 5 through 8 in preparation for this week’s discussion. (60 pages)

Objectives of this third session are to examine the author’s reconnection with Creation and community through *askesis*, a voluntary confinement to a certain set of rules in order to grow or mature.

General Questions:

- What are the big ideas or issues in these chapters that jumped out to you?
- Which personal story resonated with your experiences?
- What surprised you? What challenged you? What encouraged you?
- What do you agree or disagree with? Was there anything in their experience that you couldn’t really relate to?

Focused Questions:

- Throughout this section of reading, the author describes the experience of coming to see “inconveniences” and “difficulties” as unexpected blessings. Resourcefulness became a key ingredient in his family’s pursuit of local living. Share an experience where sacrifice and resourcefulness yielded an unexpected blessing.
- On pages 71 - 72, the author likens his discovery of the “illusions of choice” at the grocery store to the discovery of the “Man behind the curtain” in the *Wizard of Oz* (specifically, in reference to milk on page 68 and flour on page 71). Were you aware of the fact that many foods come from the same source, but are marketed differently? If not, what is your reaction to learning this information?
- In Chapter 6, the author describes the rhythm of his local community. He describes his congregation’s attempt to reconnect with the community through a local farmers’ market. What are your reactions to his question, “What does it take to break us out of our isolation and forge authentic connections in community?”
- According to the author, our experience of Christian community is often shortchanged by our tendency to separate God from the reality of daily life (see pages 85 - 87 for reference on this). How do you react to this thought?
- Have 2 or 3 people to share their favorite “community” memory, where they experienced a specific sense of connection and belonging. What sort of activities did you do together, and how did it make you feel?

- In Chapter 7, the author discusses the counterintuitive freedom that came from narrowing their consumer choices. It also allowed them to embrace things that were priorities. How is it possible that placing limitations on choices lead to a greater sense of freedom? Has that been your experience? Name some examples.
- On page 113, the author writes about how social pressures had driven their consumer choices. Specifically, he references the challenge to turn his manicured suburban lawn into a vegetable garden. How do social pressures influence your consumer choices?

Section 2: Bible Exploration

Read Deuteronomy 8:1-14 (Manna in the wilderness)

It is here that the Israelites are reminded how God provided for them after they left Egypt and wandered in the desert for 40 years.

- How did God provide for Israel during their 40-year exile in the desert? (See Exodus 16 for more background on manna and quail.) Why didn't God let them build up stockpiles of food? If the wilderness was a time of *askesis* or spiritual formation, what did God want to form in them?
- What are you tempted to find security in, other than God, when life becomes challenging?
- Why is it so easy to forget God during challenging times?

Read Luke 4:1-13 (Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness)

- What do you think is the significance of Jesus starting his ministry with this experience of fasting and temptation in the wilderness? Why was it necessary for Jesus to experience this? How did this prepare him for his ministry and journey to the cross? How is it that this experience made him stronger, not weaker?
- *Askesis* is loosely defined as a voluntary confinement to a certain set of rules in order to grow or mature. The author quotes Eugene Peterson who calls it a voluntary disaster.

We are familiar with the frequently beneficial consequences of involuntary askesis. How many times have we heard as we have visited a parishioner in the days following a heart attack, “It’s the best thing that ever happened to me—I’ll never be the same again. It woke me up to the reality of my life, to God, to what is important.” Suddenly instead of mindlessly and compulsively pursuing an abstraction—success, or money, or happiness—the person is reduced to what is actually there, to the immediately personal—family, geography, body—and begins to live freshly in love and appreciation. The change is a direct consequence of a forced realization of human limits. Pulled out of the fantasy of a god condition and confined to the reality of the human condition, the person is surprised to be living not a diminished life but a deepened life, not a crippled life but a zestful life...

Askesis is voluntary disaster. . . . Why wait? Why wait for an accident, an illness, a failure? Why not take deliberate steps now to rid myself of the illusions of being a god, study the limits of my mortality, and sink myself into the quite marvelous but sin-obscured realities of creation and salvation?³

- What do you think of that concept of voluntary disaster? How does Jesus’ model in the wilderness help us understand the role of askesis in our journey of faith?
- Do you employ any form of *askesis* in your Christian journey? If so, what spiritual disciplines comprise your *askesis* (prayer, fasting, journaling, etc.)? What benefits have you seen as a result?

For Next Time: Lesson 4 will focus on “Section III: Summer” and Chapters 9 through 10. (31 pages)

³ Eugene Peterson, *Under the Upredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1992), 75.

Year of Plenty Small Group Discussion Guide Session #4

This discussion focuses on “Section III: Summer” and Chapters 9 through 10. (31 pages)
Objectives of this fourth discussion are to examine the concept of an “earthy spirituality,”
reconnecting the spiritual and material worlds.

General Questions:

- What are the big ideas or issues in this section of reading?
- Which personal story touched you, and with what affect?
- What do you agree or disagree with? What is your emotional reaction to the story?
- What are you noticing as the story unfolds? What do you find interesting?
...surprising? ...provocative?

Focused Questions:

- “Summer” begins with the author describing the long and careful cultivation of his garden, only to be met by the destructive forces of an intense hailstorm. Share an experience where you invested a lot of time and energy into something, only to see it compromised or destroyed in a short period of time.
- On pages 128 - 130, the author tells about his assumption that spiritual and secular matters were separate. He describes his journey of realizing that this is a false divide and that he is called to an integrated and holistic faith. While we are not all pastors like the author, how do we as Christians tend to separate our spiritual lives and secular lives? Have you experienced that disconnect? Conversely, what are some ways that you integrate these two areas?
- On pages 132 - 133, the author describes that the metaphor of the “individual consumer” dominates our lives. He says: “We have drunk so deeply from the well of self interest that these images [of ourselves as responsible members of a community of mutual love] are stillborn.” His response to this problem is to say that we need to enter into “the actual circumstances of our lives.” What is your reaction to his diagnosis and prescription?
- At the beginning of chapter 9 the author quotes Wendell Berry who wrote:

“Perhaps the greatest disaster of human history is one that happened to or within religion: that is, the conceptual division between the holy and the world, the excerpting of the Creator from the creation. . . . and this split in public attitudes was inevitably mirrored in the lives of individuals: A man could aspire to heaven with his mind and his heart while destroying the earth, and his fellow men, with his hands.”⁴

⁴ Wendell Berry, *A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 1971, 1972), 4, 5.

What is your reaction to Berry's quote? What does he mean that someone can aspire to heaven and destroy the earth?

- The author begins Chapter 10 by adding another dimension to his family's experiment - the dignity of animals. He goes on to discuss some of the industrial animal practices that are driven by society's demand for animal products (especially meat, but also dairy, eggs, etc.) How is the dignity of animals undermined by our consumer culture? Do you think that a Christian vision for the world includes the welfare of animals? Explain and discuss.
- The introduction to summer concludes with the author wondering what America would look like if we all viewed ourselves "as farmers, caretakers and stewards of the land and animals that provide us with food." (p. 151) How do you think adopting this mindset would change you? How would it potentially change society?

Section 2 – Bible Exploration

Read Genesis 1:28 - 30 (Creation story - subdue & rule)

- The NIV version of this passage states that God charged man to "subdue" the world and "rule over" the living creatures. What is meant by these commands?

This excerpt from Steven Bouma-Prediger's book, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (p. 74) will be helpful in sorting through the meaning of these terms.

The Hebrew verbs in Genesis 1:26-28 indicate that one dimension of the human calling is mastery. The earth-creature is called to subdue (hdbas') and have dominion over (rddd) other creatures. We are called to dominion. But what does this mean? Does dominion, as is often assumed, necessarily mean domination? A larger canonical perspective sheds light on this important question. For example, Psalm 72 speaks most clearly of the ideal king-of-one who rules and exercises dominion properly. The psalm unequivocally states that such a ruler executes justice for the oppressed, delivers the needy, helps the poor, and embodies righteousness in all he does. In short, the proper exercise of dominion yields shalom-the flourishing of all creation. This is a far cry from dominion as domination. And Jesus, in the Gospel accounts, defines dominion in terms clearly contrary to the way it is usually understood. For Jesus, to rule is to serve. To exercise dominion is to suffer, if necessary, for the good of the other. There is no question of domination, exploitation, misuse. Humans, therefore, are called to rule, but only if ruling is understood rightly.

But once again this is only part of the picture. Yes, we are called to exercise dominion, but we are also called to service. For example, Genesis 2:5 speaks of humans serving the earth ('addm is to cabad the 'Idamd). And Genesis 2:15- the last part of which is painted on the door of every Chicago police car-defines the human calling in terms of service: We are to serve (Mbad) and protect (samar). We are to serve and protect the garden that is creation-literally be a slave to the earth for its own good, as well as for our benefit. Taking both of these aspects of our doing seriously further implies that dominion must be defined in terms of service. We are called to dominion as service.

- How has sin corrupted God’s commission for us to subdue and rule? How is this reflected in the treatment of land? ...in the treatment of animals?
- How might we recover a sense of dominion as service toward the flourishing of all creation?

Read Colossians 1:15-20 (In him all things were created....hold together...and through him all things reconciled)

- In just a few short verses Paul uses this phrase “all things” six times. It’s actually one Greek word, *panta*. Compare how this word is used in other places in the New Testament:

- **Ephesians 1:7-10**

*⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, ⁹ he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰ to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity **to all things** in heaven and on earth under Christ.*

- **1 Peter 4:11**

*¹¹ If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in **all things** God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.*

- **Revelation 21:3-5**

³ ...I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

*⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making **everything** new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”*

- Compare this use with the use of the word “all” in Genesis 1:31. (The ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, known as the *Septuagint*, uses the same Greek word, *panta*, to describe the comprehensive work of God.)

*³¹ God saw **all** that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.*

- What picture emerges from the verses about the scope of God’s redeeming work in Christ? Is there anything left out? Is there anything that we can cast aside and say it doesn’t matter?

- Are there different aspects of the “all things” of God that we have diminished and thought of as unimportant? If so, how can we work to recover a sufficiently comprehensive vision for the Christian life?
- What is one aspect of the “all things” of God that you have intentionally or unintentionally marginalized as less important or unimportant to your faith? What is one practical step you can take this week to explore that and learn about how God’s redemptive purposes are unfolding in that arena?
 - Option of planning to share what you’ve learned at our next gathering.

For Next Time: Lesson 5 will focus on the foreword by Eugene Peterson and “Section IV: Autumn” and Chapters 11 & 12. (38 pages)

Year of Plenty Small Group Discussion Guide Session #5

Have participants read the foreword by Eugene Peterson and “Section IV: Autumn” and Chapters 11 through 13. (38 pages) Objectives of this fifth discussion are to examine the concepts of “living in ordinary time” and loving our neighbors as an environmental act.

General Questions:

- Optional Follow-up from previous group meeting: Check in about the practical step you took to explore that and learn about how God’s redemptive purposes are unfolding in that arena?
- What are the issues and ideas in this section of reading that caught your attention? What was your favorite part?
- Which personal story touched you, and with what affect?
- What do you agree or disagree with?
- What questions are raised for you?

Focused Questions:

- In the Introduction to autumn, the author recounts his experience of the garden harvest as a week of abundance followed by a return to the “ordinary.” He states, “Life is like that, with most of our days spent working toward short-lived fulfillments.” In what way(s) does this statement resonate with you or conflict with your perspectives? Is that reality discouraging?
- In Chapter 11 the author discusses how his church’s “green” efforts were distorted by the media as a gimmick to fill church pews. Respond to the author’s question on p. 158: “How did we end up as the cultural mercenaries out to save our churches and the environmentalists were the ones interested in saving the world?”
 - Why do you think there has there often been a disconnect between the Christian faith and environmentalism?
 - How do you feel about the environmental movement? Is it something churches should be actively involved in?
- On page 167 the author quotes John Muir’s description of his hosts reaction to him being out in a storm. He says they
*bestirred themselves for his comfort, pitying him for having been in such frightful weather. But with face glowing as if he has just come down from Mount Sinai, he exclaimed, “Don’t pity me. Pity yourselves. You stay here at home, dry and defrauded of all the glory I have seen. Your souls starve in the midst of abundance!”*⁵

⁵ Linnie Marsh Wolfe, *Son of the Wilderness: The Life of John Muir*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 179.

The author draws on these words to describe the reality that we often miss out on the grand abundance of what God is doing in the world. What is your reaction to this?

- On pages 159-160 the author references the book “UnChristian.” According to the book, statistics show that there is little day-to-day difference between Christians and non-Christians. How do you differentiate your own life/lifestyle from those that are non-Christian in meaningful ways? Why do you suppose there is not more of a discernable difference?
- The author writes on pages 180 and 181 about the inequity between his family’s fortunes and those of the Palaung refugees. Have you ever had that experience of encountering extreme poverty? How did it impact your life? How do we reconcile our experiences of abundance when others are hard pressed for the basics?
- On page 186, the author writes: sirir

“Sirirat put words to what I was feeling. She said, ‘The problem with the sex trade in Thailand is that the basic nature of human relationship between two human beings is debased to profit making. It is a fundamental violation of the will of God.’ This observation clarified for me not only what was going on in Thailand but also spoke to what we had been learning back home.”

What do you think about Sirirat’s observation? The immediate context is the extreme example of prostitution, but are there other ways that we reduce the nature of human relationships to profit-making alone? What’s the problem with this? How does this violate the will of God?

- The author highlights the stark contrast between “real” Thailand and “resort” Thailand. How does money insulate us from reality? How does money not only keep others out (like at the resort), but also keep people in, isolated from hard realities?

Section 3: Bible Exploration

Read John 1:1-4; 14 (The Word became flesh...)

In the Foreword of the book Eugene Peterson writes:

*The embracing context for this story as it is told here is the Word that became flesh, moved into our neighborhood—think of it, our very backyards!—and revealed God to us. Care of creation (environmentalism) is fundamentally about this **incarnation**, the core doctrine of the Christian faith, God with us in the Jesus of history. (page IX)*

*What this means, and it is the task of the Christian community to insist on this, is that Jesus is not a principle or an idea or a truth—nothing abstract, nothing in general, nothing impersonal, nothing grandiose. When God revealed himself definitively he did it in a human body, an **incarnation**. (page XI)*

Year of Plenty is a...witness to the sanctity of the everyday, the ordinary, the things we eat and clothes we wear, the names of our neighbors and the money we spend, which is to say, Jesus in our neighborhood. (page XII)

In his writing about this “incarnation” Peterson draws on his translation of John 1:14 in the Message which reads:

¹⁴The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.

- Why is it important to emphasize that Jesus came in the flesh? What are the implications of this flesh and blood savior “moving into the neighborhood?” How do you respond to the idea of Jesus living in your neighborhood/dwelling with you?
- What does this incarnation tell us about the redeeming work of Jesus in the world? How does it inform the way we go about following Jesus in the world? What does this mean for the work of the church in the world?
- The author writes about his experience of getting out of his office and into the neighborhood as a way of embracing the incarnation of Jesus. What does it look like for you to join God in the neighborhood? What’s something you could do this week to join God in the neighborhood?

Read Matthew 22:34 – 40 (Love your neighbor as yourself)

- Given the context of this book, has your definition of “neighbors” changed? How do you currently live out loving others as yourself?
- How is living out this command an “environmental act?” Is caring for the environment a way to love our neighbors? How? What does that look like?

Read 2 Corinthians 8:13-15 (Our desire is that there might be equality)

- Paul casts a vision of sharing resources in order that there might be equity. How do we reconcile this vision with the reality of dramatic inequity in our communities and around the world?
- Paul acknowledges that some will have “much” and others will have “little.” This is a quote from Exodus 16, where God describes the provision of manna in the wilderness. How does it change our experience of our resources if we understand them as God’s provision as opposed to our possessions?
- Describe an experience of sharing with others out of your “much?” Describe an experience of receiving from others when you had “little.” Which was easier for you?
- Group Experiment: Have everyone in the group identify something they have an abundance of, and in a practical way have them sort out how to share it with other members of the group who don’t have as much of that resource. Whether it’s sharing books or zucchini, the point is to reflect on the practice of sharing out of abundance.

For Next Time: Lesson 6 will focus on Chapter 14 and summary reflections (9 pages)

Year of Plenty Small Group Discussion Guide

Session #6

Lesson 6 focuses on Chapter 14 and summary thoughts about the book as a whole.

The author offers no overt call to action, but the reader is left with many questions. The answers to these questions may nudge participants toward a new beginning in food habits, relationships, faith or all of these.

Section 1 – Responding to the Reading

General Questions:

- What are the big ideas or issues in the chapter?
- What do you agree or disagree with?
- What questions are raised for you?

Focused Questions

- On page 190 the author cites a passage from the account of William Least Heat-Moon’s back roads American journey in his van, “Ghost Dancer.” Moon states, “But I did learn what I didn’t know I wanted to know.” The author then recounts what he and his family learned in their “Year of Plenty.” What have you learned that you didn’t know you wanted to know during your journey through this book?
- Page 193 concludes a section of Chapter 14 discussing an article from *The New Yorker*. The article touches on a fault line in eco-discussions between individual and group action. The argument is summed up this way: “The only way to make a difference is in the political realm of regulation and legislation.” Where do you stand on this issue of individual or group action and why? Do “little” personal decisions of conscience make a difference in the face of all these big global issues?
- On page 194, the author states that “outsourcing meaningful responsibility to governments, agencies, and organizations reflects a particular sickness of the modern world.” What is your response to this statement?
- On page 197, the author recounts that after 5 months the family had essentially established entirely new habits. These habits became a “new normal.” Have you ever instituted a habit change? If so, how long did it take to ingrain? Do you think you could undertake something similar to the Goodwin family and have a new normal after 5 months? Why or why not?

- The author turns Wendell Berry’s line, “eating is an agricultural act,” into “eating is a theological act.” He then goes on to state that “more than that, buying food or anything else, is a theological act.” The basic point is that how we use our money and resources is an expression of our faith. Thinking about your purchases, how do they reflect your faith commitments? How do they not?
- See page 197 and the first full paragraph - does this help you see a greater meaning in daily actions/decisions?

But at the end of his article, Pollan suggests an orientation of hope that both transcends the circumstances on the ground and more deeply anchors us in those very circumstances saying, “Going personally green is a bet, nothing more or less, though it’s one we probably all should make, even if the odds of it paying off aren’t great. Sometimes you have to act as if acting will make a difference, even when you can’t prove that it will.”

Section 2 – Faith Discovery

Read Hebrews 11:1; 12:1-3 (confident hope)

- The preacher in the book of Hebrews calls the church to a confident hopefulness. How have you experienced this orientation of hopefulness in the church? How have you seen it obscured?
- The author suggests this hopeful stance is one of the great gifts the church has to offer a world that can easily get stuck in despair. How can the church more effectively share this gift?
- What are places of despair in the world today where people are struggling to find hope? How can the church enter these arenas with the gift of hopefulness? Give some examples.
- Is it easier to be hopeful or despairing in the face of global challenges?
- The author quotes Jürgen Moltmann on page 190 who wrote:

That is why faith, wherever it develops into hope, causes not rest but unrest, not patience but impatience. . . . Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it . . . for the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present.⁶

According to Moltmann, this hopeful stance in the world is disruptive and uncomfortable. It means more than just having a positive outlook or ignoring the hard realities on the ground. What is he trying to say about the experience of hope? How have you experienced that? Why is hope so disruptive? Why is so uncomfortable?

⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 21.

Section 3: Summary Reflections

As this is the conclusion of the study, spend some time together reflecting on any faith discoveries made along the way. Ask some or all of the following questions to help prompt discussion. Then spend some time in prayer about how you will respond to these discoveries moving forward.

- What has been the most powerful or challenging lesson learned during our time together?
- What had been the greatest encouragement?
- How has this book influenced the way you see others (vs. how you saw them before)?
- How has the book influenced the way you see Jesus? ...the church?
- What is something you will change as a result of our study and discussion?

Celebration Potluck: In the spirit of the *Year of Plenty* book, we encourage groups to consider a “celebration” meal. One idea is to have a potluck with the challenge of everyone making a dish including a locally grown or made ingredient. Encourage discussion about lessons learned and “take-aways” from the book during the meal time.