

**GOD
PLAYS A
PURPLE
BANJO**

and 41 Other Stories
of Inspiration,
Hope and Humor

S. JAMES MEYER



**TWENTY-THIRD
PUBLICATIONS**

twentythirdpublications.com

IN GRATITUDE FOR MY PARENTS,
RON AND JUDY MEYER,
THE OAKEN STOCK FROM
WHICH I WAS HEWN.

TWENTY-THIRD PUBLICATIONS

One Montauk Avenue, Suite 200
New London, CT 06320
(860) 437-3012 or (800) 321-0411
www.twentythirdpublications.com

Copyright © 2019 S. James Meyer. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission of the publisher. Write to the Permissions Editor.

Cover photo: © iStockphoto.com / RapidEye

ISBN: 978-1-62785-442-9

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018962303

Printed in the U.S.A.



A division of Bayard, Inc.

CONTENTS

Before the Beginning. 1

PART 1: PREPARATION

Red-Headed Dumplings 4

Dueling Car Seats. 6

Mmm, the Smell of Manual Labor. 8

Mary 11

Island of Misfit Toys 15

Bare Butts on Cold Stone 17

The Wilderness at the Top of the Stairs 20

PART 2: CELEBRATION

Bare Feet on Vinyl Floors 24

XXXL Gratitude with Matching Socks 27

Dandelion Peace Talks of 2016. 29

Star Wars Monopoly Makes Me Cry 32

I'm King of the World! 35

God Plays a Purple Banjo 37

Thanks for the Burger, Reg 40

PART 3: CONSIDERATION

Planting Radishes, Expecting Daisies. 46

Grandma's Shocking Revelation. 48

Syrup with Pancakes 51

There Are No Foam Fingers in Heaven. 53

Good Morning, Sunshine 55

Didn't Plan Any of This 58

Who Cares About the Score? 60

PART 4: EXAMINATION

A Poke at the Pops	64
Ratted Out by Tonka Tracks	66
Mercy from Three-Point Range	69
There Ain't No Lead Up There	71
We All Need More Leon	74
Desert Therapy	76
I Don't Want to Be Your Dreamboat	79

PART 5: JUBILATION

Staying Out of Pilate's Kitchen	84
Lean Back and Smile a Little	86
Rub Some Mud into Your White Carpets	88
Blessed Are the Fumbling, Bumbling, and Stumbling	91
The Happy Sunshine Polka Power Hour	94
Miss Eleanor and Reuben	96
God's in the Dirt Under Your Nails	99

PART 6: CONTEMPLATION

Esther and Lawrence in Heaven	104
Low Blocks Are for Chickens	106
God Bakes Her Own Bread	109
Dark Night of Me	112
Ron and Judy—What a Couple of Characters	114
Potato-Draining Wisdom	117
The Woman Who Slows the Earth	120

BEFORE THE BEGINNING

Three hundred fifty-three high school students sat on folding chairs in the gym. Some yawned. A few got a little rowdy. No one wanted to be there except for the handful who were really into religion. An all-school Mass had just concluded, but everyone was asked to remain while the principal walked to the microphone and introduced a guest speaker.

The students all knew who he was. Percy Walsch owned and operated Spirit Haus, a liquor store on the east side. He was a big supporter of the school and sent birthday cards to each of the seniors when they turned eighteen, along with a coupon to save ten percent on “graduation supplies.” It was 1981, and the legal drinking age was eighteen, so no one bothered to give this practice a second thought. Actually, a couple of years later, the state legislature did give it a second thought and moved the legal drinking age to twenty-one. Percy still sent cards and coupons to all the seniors, but the new coupons noted that Spirit Haus also sold ice and soda.

Percy lowered the microphone about eleven inches and cleared his throat: “Before I begin speaking, I’d like to say something.” That’s all I remember from that day. I recall nothing about the Mass or about Percy Walsch’s message to the students. I only remember his grammatical snafu, which informed us that once he began speaking, he would have nothing to say.

This was the church of my youth—honest and sincere, yet often confused and searching for something to say. It meant well, but we could never be sure if it was serving the people or itself. We sat in chairs because we were told to, registering little beyond the ironies and contradictions. As a result, I believe many of us became observers rather than participants. We didn't reject faith, we just didn't connect with the church. We were searching for meaning and direction in this life while our pastors and religion teachers were telling us to worry about the next life.

Somehow along the way, wise people introduced me to a deeper concept of faith, a church that, like the incarnation of Jesus himself, unifies the ideas of heaven and earth. I wrote this book in that spirit. The division between sacred and secular, I wholeheartedly believe, is false and dangerous. Each breath, each moment, each person is a sacred revelation of God among us. Hopefully, these stories will illuminate just how extraordinary your ordinary days are, how very sacred each breath, each moment, and each person is.

Authors often advise readers on how to read a book such as this. They'll suggest you read one story a day and then meditate on its application in your life, sometimes giving you self-guided reflection questions. I'm not going to do that. Skip around, start in the back, draw numbers randomly, devour it like a bucket of popcorn, or sip it like hot tea. It's organized by seasons, so some stories may seem more relevant at certain times than others, but life isn't as tidy as a church calendar. We often experience moments of incarnation on Monday, the deserts of Lent on Wednesday, and the joy of resurrection on Friday, all in the same week.

Part One

PREPARATION

Twenty-Third
Publications
SAMPLE



Red-Headed Dumplings

O DELIA MEYER MADE THE WORLD'S BEST RED-HEADED DUMPLINGS. At least that's what everyone claimed. I can't say for sure because I've never tasted anyone else's red-headed dumplings. Nor would I want to. For those unfamiliar with rural German culinary arts, red-headed dumplings are pretty much deep-fried bread/egg balls smothered in gravy. There is so much simultaneously right and wrong with the whole idea. Anytime you deep fry anything and pour gravy over it, you've entered the conceptual tension between good and evil. If Jesus and Lucifer ever had dinner together, I imagine there would be red-headed dumplings on the table. And probably Lambrusco. It's the sort of thing that levels the playing field because everyone is equally confused about whether or not it's OK.

Growing up, they were *the* staple of every extended Meyer family event. After Grandma passed away, the women in the family politically maneuvered to identify who would prepare the dumplings. Actually, I don't know that for sure. I might be making it up. But I want to believe that making the red-headed dumplings for a large extended family gathering was both a privilege and a curse. This is a family of over seventy good-natured, wise-cracking, opinionated people. If they disapproved of something, they would tell you everything wrong with it. If they approved of something, they would still tell you everything wrong with it, but they'd smile more.

Everyone in the family agreed that the red-headed dumplings were delicious, but I don't honestly know if they were

agreeing in fact or idea. In fact, they were good, but they weren't oh-my-God-the-world-can-stop-spinning good. They certainly weren't worth the level of praise ladled upon them by people who ordinarily save praise for draft horses. It's the memory of Grandma and a deep reverence for how much she valued large family meals that made them delicious. Red-headed dumplings place Grandma directly in our midst. You can feel her. It is as though she is within you and all around you. Her story is our story.

Eucharist is like this. It's not going to mean a whole lot if we don't know Christ. I don't mean know of him or know about him. I mean really know Christ. Red-headed dumplings have meaning because of who Grandma was and what values she passed to us. Eucharist has meaning because of who Christ is. If it wasn't for everything he said and did, everything he brought to the very first Eucharist, there would be nothing sacred about any of this. It all would have been forgotten long ago.

So what did Jesus bring? Well, he brought everything and laid it all on the table. He said, listen, we're not going to experience God's kingdom unless we pour our hearts into it. Here, I'll go first. Now it's your turn. You do the same.

I think he's still waiting for us to go.

The Catholic Liturgy of the Eucharist begins with the Offertory for a reason. This is the bold statement of what we're willing to lay on the table to experience God's kingdom. What's it worth to us? Jesus showed us what he was willing to ante up. His body and his blood. And then he went out and did it.

The preparation question we face is, how much of our own blood, sweat, and tears are we putting into the cup? Eucharist

has very little meaning if we're holding any part of ourselves back. Bring it all, Jesus says. Pour your heart out...your hopes, your dreams, your struggles, your pains, your joy, your deep-fried emptiness, and then smother it all in the gravy of love. Lay it all on the table so that the Holy Spirit can come upon it and turn it all into the body of Christ.



Dueling Car Seats

I WAS QUITE SURE I HAD LIFE FIGURED OUT. After all, at twenty-five, I had my first good job, a cute wife on my arm, and I was living the lyrics of John Mellencamp—*driving around with the car top down and the radio on*. If self-satisfied smugness is a sin, I was its dark prince. Michelle and I would notice people our age with children, and we'd snicker at their double-barrel strollers and dueling car seats. No thank you. We were living large.

And then one Sunday afternoon, we were at our favorite ice cream shop and I noticed Michelle was looking past me with a strange gaze in her eyes. I peered over my shoulder and saw an infant giggling in its mother's arms. I turned back. Michelle's iron-melting eyes were now fixed on me. By the time my head stopped spinning, I was at the car dealership trading in my freedom for a cherry-red minivan with built-in juice-box holders.

I was changing. Not just on the outside, but on the inside. My sense of self, my identity, was changing. I would walk out in public proudly swinging a Pooh Bear diaper bag and flip a spit rag over my shoulder like I had once carried soccer cleats. My perspectives and priorities were changing. This one little life was having a profound impact on me. Michelle, of course, was going through a similar identity shift, but it seemed so natural with her. She had always been a gentle, nurturing soul; I had not.

Sometimes I wonder if parenthood changed Mary and Joseph. How could it not? Did they feel as ill-equipped and inadequate as I did? I imagine they felt as joyful and thankful, but did they also feel as unworthy and insecure? And then I wonder...what if they weren't the first people God asked? Simply asking the question feels a little sacrilegious, but what if Mary wasn't the first person God asked to bring Christ into the world? What if God had been asking people all along, but Mary was the first with the faith, courage, and heart to say yes? And what if Mary wasn't the last? What if God has been asking each of us ever since, "Will you change your vision for yourself and give me life within you?"

In the gospel, people are all abuzz. They share our eagerness as they await their savior. "What should we do? How should we prepare?" they ask John the Baptist. And John says, "Flood Facebook with trite memes and baby photos." No, John the Baptist says, "If you have two cloaks, give one to somebody who has none. Do the same with your food. Basically, make some room in your heart to have compassion for others." I guess that's still the message today. If we really want to experience Christ alive in our world, we need

to change our perspectives and priorities. Make room in our hearts for a whole lot of love.



Mmm, the Smell of Manual Labor

IN 1972 I WAS A WILY EIGHT-YEAR-OLD WITH A BASEBALL GLOVE HANGING ON THE HANDLEBARS OF MY BICYCLE. I needed to step on a cinder block to actually get on the bike, and my feet barely touched the pedals, but I was proud as punch. Life was pretty good, very nearly a cliché. As a small kid in a small town, I had the privilege of being oblivious to the turmoil going on in the world around me during those years—the war in Vietnam, the fight for racial equality, the Cold War with its nuclear threat, and the leaked Pentagon Papers. My biggest concern was saving enough coins to purchase my next Matchbox car.

Life was considerably harder for my father. He was a young carpenter working long days and late nights to support his wife and four children. I barely saw him. He left each morning long before I rolled out of bed, came home for dinner with the family around 6 PM, and then worked again in the evenings well past my bedtime. But he was my hero, and we had two wonderful, glorious embraces every day. As the clock ticked

past 5:30, I would hang out near our back door, waiting impatiently for the sound of his truck in the driveway. When he walked through the door, I'd leap into his strong arms and fill my nose with the smell of sawdust and sweat. Later in the evening, proudly dressed in Green Bay Packers pajamas, I'd make a bare-footed dash across the yard to Dad's workshop to say goodnight and get a hug. Again, I'd breathe in the distinct scent of oak or maple or pine blended with human perspiration. This was no store-bought cologne; it was one hundred percent all-natural perfume.

In my mind, this is how love smelled, and this is what men did; they loved their children and they worked hard to support their families. If something was made better, when the kitchen was remodeled or the church was painted, when old cars were fixed or new trees were planted, it was because someone rolled up his sleeves and got to work. Nothing happened by itself. Behind everything that worked were people who worked, people who loved their children and set down tools to give them hugs.

It was in this era, in the tension between down-home values and an increasing awareness of an unjust world, that Pope Paul VI gave us these famous words: "If you want peace, work for justice." This was and remains powerful and sage wisdom. He could have said if you want peace, pray for justice, or promote justice, or pursue justice, or vote for justice, or even fight for justice. All would have been appropriate. But the verb the Holy Father chose was *work*, work for justice.

The word "work" is powerful on three levels: it is active, it is constructive, and it is personal. We can and should pray, promote, pursue, and vote for justice, yes, but it's not enough.

As St. James writes, faith without good works is dead (James 2:14–26). It’s empty, meaningless. If we want peace, it is not enough to talk about it. We are called to put our faith into action, to grab hammers and shovels, to put our backs into our labor, and to work to advance justice for all humanity. This is what Christian disciples do—they work.

Second, the word “work” invokes a spirit of being constructive. Almost all public dialog lately is destructive. It tears people down by criticizing, condemning, and complaining. Work, in the tradition of the carpenter’s son, is about building something good. If we want peace, we must build justice.

And third, the word “work” makes it personal. Work not only requires something *from* us; it requires something *of* us. We have to give of our own time and energy, of our own selves. “Do you love me?” Jesus asks Peter. “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” “Then feed my lambs. Tend my sheep,” Jesus says. Go out in the world and get to work. In a representative democracy, we too easily buy into the illusion that we can change the world by electing others to bring about justice without ever having to roll up our own sleeves or get our hands dirty. But we cannot be disciples by proxy. We have to do it ourselves.

Not all of us can work for justice. The sick, the aging, those with mental illness, victims of abuse and human trafficking, children, the preborn...these people are unable to work for justice, so they need us to work all the harder on their behalf. Yes, we should pray for them, vote for them, and even fight for them. But mostly, they need us to work for them. To work in a way that is active, constructive, and personal.

Christianity is a working faith. Whatever you *do* for the least, Jesus said, you *do* for me. Do the hard work. Break your-

self open and pour yourself out in the name of justice for others. That's what love looks like. *Do* this in memory of me.

The world may be a complex and dangerous place, but that's not new. It wasn't new in 1971 and it wasn't new in 1941, or in 1861 or in the year 31. But if anything is going to be made better, it's because someone is willing to do the work to make it better. Discipleship is a scent people should be able to smell on us, and it should smell one hundred percent all natural as it drips off our brows and seeps from our pores. If you want peace, WORK for justice.



Mary

MARY PLOPPED HERSELF DOWN UNDER AN OLIVE TREE AND TOOK A LOAD OFF. The water jar she was carrying from the well seemed especially heavy this morning. Everything seemed especially heavy this morning. She hadn't slept well. Ugh, the wedding plans were starting to get stressful and Joey (he hated it when she called him that) just didn't seem to engage. He was no help. Is this what marriage was going to be like, leaving her to deal with everything while he's off at his "job" all day? What if she wants to get her own job? He won't even discuss it. That's all she's asking for, to just have a conversation. Is that too much to ask? Doesn't she have a right to dream too?