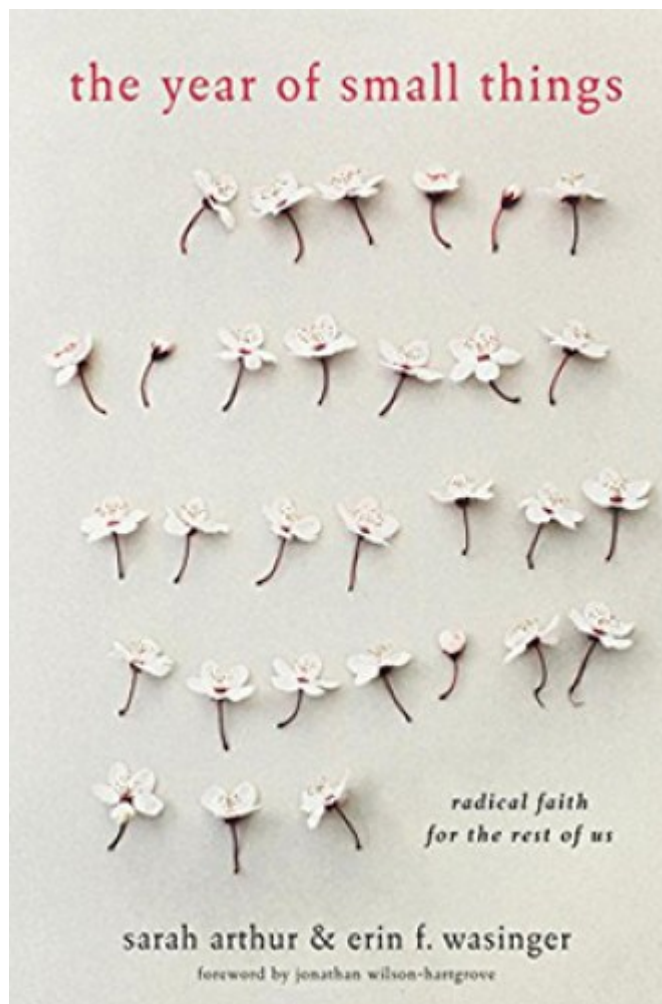


Discipleship through covenant friendship

Sarah Arthur and Erin Wasinger write about their experiment in radical faith, one small step at a time.

by [Greg Williams](#) in the [July 19, 2017](#) issue

In Review



The Year of Small Things

Radical Faith for the Rest of Us

By Sarah Arthur and Erin F. Wasinger
Brazos

Perversely, high hopes can lead to inaction. Grandiose dreams can bog us down. As P. J. O'Rourke once put it, everyone wants to save the world but no one wants to do the dishes.

The Year of Small Things is about doing the dishes. It's about the hard work of serious discipleship when you have a life and family. Two couples, the Arthurs and the Wasingers, commit together to take seriously God's discipleship commands, beginning a yearlong experiment. They make small changes in their everyday lives at the rate of one per month, starting with covenant friendship and moving into efforts toward comprehensive social transformation. Sarah and Erin write about the results.

The Arthurs and Wasingers don't try to change everything about their lives; their aim is to make themselves "a little less 'normal,' a lot more vulnerable, way more honest, and . . . a bit more like Jesus." Their 12 changes are inspired by the 12 marks of New Monasticism, but they are more bite-sized—although still challenging. The two families create budgets to discuss with each other around the question "how can I be more generous?" They decide not to look at Facebook for one day each week. They pray the Lord's Prayer with their children once a week at bedtime. Such practices won't change the world. But they will bring people closer to Jesus.

Arthur and Wasinger recognize that their focused, radical discipleship has a long background, ranging from ancient monastic communities to Shane Claiborne and Donald B. Kraybill's *The Upside-Down Kingdom*. They write with some expectation that their audience is familiar with these ways of discipleship. Nothing here feels surprising.

One of the most common critiques of radical Christianity is its root implausibility in the culture of the modern family. Arthur and Wasinger assess this difficulty honestly and directly. How will the kids react when told that there won't be a stuff-filled Christmas this year? What does a commitment to incarnational living look like when you have to decide whether to enroll your children in the underfunded local public school or a private school?

The Arthurs and the Wasingers invite readers to sit with them as they negotiate these decisions. Listening into their processes of discernment, readers may discern more clearly a way forward for themselves. Further, knowing that others have successfully walked the same path gives readers courage that they can do it too.

The authors raise questions about the lack of diversity in many radical Christian communities, acknowledging the awkwardness of asking such questions. Many radical Christian communities are predominantly white and made up mostly of overly educated folks from middle-class backgrounds. Even the friendship between Arthur and Wasinger is rooted in similarity—of goals and theology, but also of demography and occupation. As an overly educated white middle class man who has lived in such communities, these questions weigh on me. Is renouncing possessions and trying to live simply just another manifestation of race, class, and educational privilege?

My primary question for Arthur and Wasinger is one that I could pose to any proposal for radical Christian discipleship: Why is the covenanted faithful friendship that you model unusual, and how does it not speak to what we do all the time in the church? In my Presbyterian tradition, when someone is baptized or becomes a member of our church she takes vows. She promises to live a committed life of discipleship to God in the context of the church. In turn, the church (as a body) takes vows to her, promising to help build her up in Christ.

Arthur and Wasinger make it clear that the covenant friendship they model and recommend must feed into church relationships—one of their 12 small steps even addresses this exact point. But I wonder if these kinds of committed covenant friendships should rather be how we expect and plan for churches to operate. Obviously, this is easier said than done. But we could start deliberately trying to theorize radical discipleship within the local church, rather than segment it out to a special set of super-Christians. There's a reason the Reformation set monasticism aside. Arthur and Wasinger, with all their care to open their practice to a broader audience, recommend practices that local churches as outposts of the kingdom should undertake.

Still, *The Year of Small Things* offers a helpful look at what serious Christian discipleship might look like in practice. It isn't just for recent college graduates. It's also for people whose lives have gotten more complicated. Although Arthur and Wasinger don't have all the answers, the way their families discern the questions in community leads to some wise and inspiring conclusions: Let's be humble. Work

together. Take small steps. And know that God loves us regardless.