

# God's invitations and nudges

By Jan Johnson

Several years ago at a holiday party, I was mesmerized by how my husband's manager and her husband could "swing dance" together. They moved together like ballet dancers. So a few weeks later, we signed up for swing dance lessons. After learning the basic steps, I was surprised to find out that at certain times I would know what to do only by watching my husband's signals. Only then would I know what steps to take.

As someone who likes to know what's going on tomorrow (otherwise known to my family as "the routine queen"), I found this terrifying — and exhilarating. I had to fix my gaze carefully on my husband's face and hands to know what to do next. In time, I learned

to do this without panic and with great joy. For me, that careful watching of another is a picture of life with God. In this dance, God is the lead partner. God invites and I follow the lead. But sometimes, God suggests daring things and I fumble. I need time to catch my breath before I can follow that lead!

## **The Gaze**

This freedom to be startled by God's nudges — yet still be loved — offers one explanation for why the Scripture passage of the rich young ruler fascinates some of us (cf. Mark 10:17-22). The young man approaches Jesus, wowing Him with flattery: "Good teacher." Jesus is not impressed, saying that

“good” is one of those words usually reserved for God (a hint, perhaps, at His divinity?). But Jesus answers the original question: To have eternal life one must keep the commandments. So the young man offers his resume: he has kept all the commandments. (All of them? Gulp.)

Then Jesus “looks at him and loves him.” Imagine that! If you were to shut your eyes and visualize Jesus looking at the man and loving him, what would that facial expression look like? Does Jesus have a welcoming, warm face? Does mercy spill from His eyes? Consider what it was like for this young man to receive such a gaze, to be so publicly treasured by someone so sought after, to receive warmth as a sunbeam shining straight upon him. He may have thought the next words out of Jesus’ mouth would be: “You are such a good person. Just keep doing what you’re doing.”

### **The Challenge**

Instead, the music shifts. Jesus offers a different invitation: “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” Was Jesus mixing His signals — a steady serene gaze followed by a whack-on-the-head challenge? Was the enormous challenge to this young man to strip himself of what made him who he was: his possessions and the potential possessions that

wealth secured, compensated for by the promise that he would have treasure in heaven? Or had the young man stopped listening by the time Jesus got to the end of the sentence?

The scene ends with the younger man exiting. He didn’t count on this. Why give up so much when he’d been good for as long as he could remember? Yet I imagine him following Jesus for days, standing at the edge of the crowds. My guess is that he engaged Jesus in yet another conversation and enjoyed that one more.

### **Not Pushy**

While many people despair at the outcome of this story, I see hope. Life with God is sometimes like this. Now and then the invitation is scary. Perhaps God speaks to us through a verse of Scripture or a homily or someone’s example, but like the young man we can’t swallow the idea of giving up so much. But the more we live out life with God, the more likely we are to find that the next day we think that obeying that command wouldn’t be so catastrophic; maybe it’s a good idea.

God’s invitations often take the form of our being challenged to give up certain possessions or cherished habits of indulgence. For me, this penetrating gaze of Jesus often comes through the example of someone else.

For many years, I’d

considered the idea that giving up eating sugar would help me because the effects of sugar seemed to cause me to lose things, forget things or become easily panicked. At times when I meditated on this passage, I even felt the pull of Jesus looking at me and loving me, stretching out His hand and asking me to surrender this "fix." But that was too drastic. I would not deprive myself that way!

Then I was befriended by a woman whom I found to be a well of serenity. She explained that she had gained this peace by giving up sugar. Several months into our friendship, I realized I had stopped eating sugar too, and it was the week before Christmas! I was shocked to see this pattern forming. I tried it one more day. And one more day. Within a few weeks, I became unwilling to go back to eating sugar. I would not give up this tranquility just to eat a piece of pumpkin pie.

Although I'd wanted to give up sugar for years, I never sensed condemnation from God over my reluctance. Instead, I experienced the continuing invitation of Jesus through his steady gaze fixed on me. God is not rude or pushy (1 Corinthians. 13:5). God allows us to make decisions that are fully our own, coerced by no one.

While the challenges are demanding, God is more gentle than we think. God looks eyes with us and invites us, but there's no shouting, no haranguing, no shaming or blaming. The invitation is given followed by a good reason (I will have treasure in heaven) and an invitation to a discipleship relationship (then come, follow me, v. 21.). I may move to the edge of the crowd for a moment, but the invitation keeps coming. It's time to accept. ❖

Jan Johnson is a retreat speaker and author of *Savoring God's Word*, which includes a detailed guided meditation through Mark 10: 17-22 ([www.janjohnson.org](http://www.janjohnson.org)).

**Flattened kitty** – When a man from our church dropped a floor jack on his toe, he limped to his living room chair and collapsed in pain. In his wounded state, he failed to notice one of his cat's newborn kittens which lay curled and sleeping on the chair in question. Soon discovered and removed, the lifeless kitten lay on a table as the man's son began mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Life was restored. When a discussion about possible names for the feline ensued, someone suggested, "How about Lazarus?"

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