

Eavesdropping: Micah 6:1-8; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Matthew 5:1-12; Psalm 15

by [Barbara Lemmel](#) in the [January 20, 1999](#) issue

In her book *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son's First Year*, Anne Lamott describes the afternoon she misplaced her father. His brain cancer had progressed to the point where he was functioning much like an eager-to-please three-year-old. Lamott had brought him along with her one day as she ran errands. Just before she ran into the local bank, she gave him a candy bar and strapped him into the passenger seat.

"Of course there was a huge line," Lamott recalls, "so every so often I'd run to the back of the bank and look through the window to make sure he was still there (as if someone were going to kidnap him)."

The last time I looked, he wasn't there--the car was empty! I felt like adrenaline had been injected directly into my heart, and I turned to stare out the windows behind the tellers, just to collect my thoughts, and through them I saw this crazy old man pass by, his face smeared with chocolate. . . . He was just walking on by, holding his candy bar, staring up at the sky as if maybe his next operating instructions were up there.

I've often envied those folks scattered through the scriptures who find their operating instructions from God full-formed in the sky above. Like Paul at Joppa. Or Elijah, who knew enough to ignore the thunder, fire and earthquake but paid close attention to the still, small voice. Or Moses, who didn't find instructions in the sky, exactly, but received more detailed directions than he wanted from a burning bush.

I've always had to eavesdrop to find the instructions I'm seeking. When God's word of wounded grace moves Micah into a penitential frenzy, my ears perk up. What shall I offer for my sins? Would my firstborn (horrors!) be offering enough? *What can I do?* It's an honest question, wrenched from a sin-grieved heart that yearns to reunite with the Heart of All. I've asked it more than once.

And then the operating instructions come: "Do justice. Love steadfastly. Walk humbly with your God." So simple. So complex.

So life-changing. As he begins the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus enumerates the results of following God's operating instructions. Walking humbly with the Holy One necessitates meekness, purity of heart and poorness of spirit. Peacemaking and the hunger for righteousness fuel the pursuit of justice. Steady, faithful loving results all too often in mourning, even as it flowers into mercy. Whenever we find these characteristics, Jesus says we find those who are following God's directions with their lives. And these qualities set us up against the outside order, which has a multitude of ways to persecute those who do not follow its own operating instructions. It's been happening since Micah's day, and there's no end in sight.

In between the prophet's anguish and the Beatitudes, however, lie the ordinary questions and decisions of daily life. In the face of those specific concerns, the heavens provide precious little guidance.

So I keep eavesdropping. I take every opportunity to spend time with a friend who, though only my age, is wise beyond his years. I drink in his gentle sensitivity, his attention to those on the edge of our social circle. I marvel at his skill at finding a third way through any controversy. I listen to his passion about making this world more whole, more holy.

I scour the library and bookstores for books by those who struggle as I do with the commands of God and the demands of everyday living. I treasure the words of Henri Nouwen, which call me back to sanity when the outside order has poisoned my discipleship:

The question is not: How many people take you seriously? How much are you going to accomplish? Can you show some results? But: Are you in love with Jesus? . . . In our world of loneliness and despair, there is an enormous need for men and women who know the heart of God, a heart that forgives, that cares, that reaches out and wants to heal.

I eavesdrop on the disciples' conversations with Jesus. "Do you love me, Peter? Then feed my sheep." "This is the greatest commandment: that you love God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength, and your neighbor as yourself." And when I hear Jesus say to the Twelve in great frustration, "Why do I speak to you at all?" I take comfort in the fact that I'm not the first to have difficulty putting God's instructions into practice. I turn again to the usual channels--prayer, the scriptures, my faith community, reading and conversation. I go searching for the humble walk

that might illuminate the will of God for my life today. One early morning, my three-year-old son Micah (yes, named for the prophet) and I were driving into town for preschool. Micah was in the front seat with me. To entertain himself, he began looking in the vanity mirror on the back of his sun visor. I began a game with him. "Who's in the mirror? Is it Daddy?" "No!" "Is it Uncle John?" "No!" "Is it an elephant?" "No!"

Then, just to make things interesting, I asked, "Is it Jesus?" Micah stopped for a moment. "You know," I continued, "whenever you look in the mirror, you see Jesus a little bit. Jesus is always in you a little bit."

Micah was silent for a moment. Then, with all the theological wisdom of a three-year-old, he corrected me. "I need Jesus to be in me a lot," he said.

That's all the operating instructions I need.