

The Leader's Way Podcast

Episode 3: Bungee Jumping with Andrew Doyle

Brandon: Why don't we try this week, finding one story of hope, just one, write it down, say, thank you, Lord, for that vision of hope. And then the next week, why don't we try two? And I guarantee before you get going, you're going to find hope every day. Welcome to the leader's way, Yale, the podcast at the intersection of. spiritual leadership, innovation, and transformation. I'm your host.

Bishop Andrew Doyle is the ninth Bishop of Texas, and I'd love the way he describes his spiritual autobiography. He says it this way, met Jesus on pilgrimage, still walking. Bishop Doyle received his MDiv from Virginia Theological Seminary after first receiving a fine arts degree. From the University of North Texas before his election in 2008, Bishop Doyle served for five years as canon to the ordinary. Today, he coaches new bishops, continues to lead in the wider church and throughout the global communion.

I think you'll find in Bishop Doyle, a kind of humility, a real practical wisdom, courage for leading and saying hard things, but always doing so with great love and compassion. This conversation felt like we were in a coffee shop as he spoke with great candor, authenticity, and hope about the future of the church.

So I hope you enjoy this conversation with Bishop Andrew Doyle. Bishop Andy Doyle, thank you so much for joining us on the Leader's Way at Yale podcast. It's great to have you.

Bishop Andy: Thank you. It's good to be with you. Thanks for the invitation.

B: One of my favorite ways to begin these conversations is by asking folks to recollect one of their earliest encounters with the divine, with God. Sometimes it's in church. Sometimes it's in nature. Does something come up for you, Bishop Doyle?

BA: My father was a priest, and so I spent a lot of time at the church on Saturdays, you know, so it was a small congregation. He had an assistant, but for the most part on Saturdays was the day he'd go up there and kind of get things ready for Sunday morning, and we lived just down the street, literally a block away, so one day he was working, and at this point the office was part of the church building itself. And he said, why don't you go look around and remember making my way into the dark sanctuary. And even though I can

remember worship times before that, the presence and peacefulness of God in that place. And so maybe a sense of awe. Uh, along with that. And so that really has been for me a touch point over the many years of ministry and life to remember that particular moment.

And it was fun to kind of recall a little bit. And of course, there are many other moments in that church, but that was very profound one. And it was certainly one of a feeling of not being alone and God's presence. Yeah. And so that was a moment early in life.

B: Thank you for sharing it. And, and then this priestly vocation emerged. Was it a clear revelation all at once? Did it slowly unfold over time? Can you tell the story of your vocation and how you were led to ministry?

BA: Truth is that vocation discernment is so different for everybody. And for me, there was a sense of trying it on from time to time, even from a very early age, some of that, of course, mimicking what I saw that my father did, but we've got pictures of me with, you know, burying animals in the backyard with a right to burial service.

So it's obviously some sense of familiarity, church very much felt like home, but I think I wrestled with the call because it was hard for me to separate my father's vocation and my vocation. It was hard to separate as I grew older, other priestly vocations in my vocation, and though I had a working through camp and other youth and young adult programs in the church, that I was constantly kind of grading against that call.

So it did, I don't, I would say it didn't come easy. And then there was a lot of flip flopping back and forth during my college years. There was a particular moment on my way to look at grad schools and go to a family reunion with then my girlfriend Joanne, later my wife, and we were thinking about all of this and talking about all of this.

We were sitting there for a long time on that plane, on the tarmac, and I just said, I don't think I'm supposed to go to grad school in fine arts. I think I'm supposed to go to seminary. She helped by saying, I think we should go and let the church make a decision about whether you are called to allow some conversation outside of ourselves, which was very wise.

That's what we did, and I was turned down and asked to spend two years doing something else and doing some therapy around the separation of my dad and me in terms of the vocational and relational pieces. My father was an alcoholic, and

so there was a lot of work I did during that time period with ACOA, or Adult Children of Alcoholics, and some other counseling, but later reapplied and accepted and went on to Virginia Seminary.

And that's the short version, but it was not a kind of peaceful, oh, I feel called, let's just go and everything will work out fine. It wasn't that at all. And it was, uh. And I can't remember who the bishop was who said this, so it was related to me and it may be complete urban myth, but he began his talk with those considering vocation by saying the church is going to hurt you now or later.

It's going to hurt you through this process because you have an expectation that it's going to affirm this, and it may not. And you'll have to deal with what that means between you and God and the church by the non communal acceptance of that vocation. And he said, the other thing is when you get into ministry and you love a great deal, your heart's going to get broken.

And so by the very act of doing ministry, you will get wounded. Sometimes, of course, there are the terrible places where the Church hurts, but he was speaking of those more tender ones, I think.

B: Thank you for sharing your path with such candor. It's a powerful reminder for me and maybe those listening, especially those who might be discerning some kind of call to ministry, that the calling is not always linear, it's not always all at once, it's not always dramatic, and that disappointment actually is intrinsically part of the process. So, thanks for witnessing that. And I imagine some of those same truths that you gleaned in your initial discernment process are also insights in your diocese. What are some of the leadership challenges that you're facing, that the Church is facing, and what are the lessons about leadership that you're currently learning or leading into and that are really required to face this moment with courage and grace?

BA: I believe that the Institutions of every type have difficulty with a number of things, and one of them is the belief that certain things or certain ways will bring success. I find the church is notorious for this, and will believe a new prayer book, or a new hymnal, or if we just get the words right, or if everybody would do morning prayer. Or if you will have these kind of spiritual experiences, if we figure out the right leadership formula, I mean, I, I just don't believe that there are magic pills if there's any pill.

I think it really is a kind of connection with Neo from the Matrix where Christ opens our eyes right in that sense of, oh, this, you know, to see the world through Christ's eyes, to see it in it's all of its diversity in it's kind of amazing

this and also its brokenness and to love all of it. And I think if there were any one thing, if we did that as leaders, I think we would have an easier time leading people or guiding people or supporting people.

And the other thing is, I think that we underestimate the power of sameness in our church, in our culture, and what I mean by that is the church is apt to continue to repeat its abuse of power and closing people out because it has this shadow side that just as it welcomes. It closes others out just as it does one thing.

It says, that's not, we're not interested in transformation in this other area. And for businesses and organizations, what you, what we know from leadership is actually you need to be open to all of the transformative acts to see in order to glean the most and a moment of entrepreneurship, we actually need as many people doing as much work leaning into transformation, learning and sharing what they're doing with as many spiritual disciplines. While I would say that the creed is kind of a bungee jumping tool for the church, I'm clear about my own faith in that, but I feel also as a bishop, I'm kind of the hub of that and that.

All of the churches and congregations and all their many diversities should be the spokes going out and then like reflecting back to the whole. So I think too often we're like, Oh, okay, so now we have it. And if we can just get everybody to believe this one thing, whatever the new thing is, that will be okay.

And it's, it's apparent on all sides. And I think for us to be successful right now, we have to say, look, we all believe in Jesus. We're all heading in this direction towards the post-apocalyptic table. We're going to be really clear with one another that everybody's welcome at that table, and everybody means everybody, and not just the ones who agree with me.

And then we're going to do the hard work of figuring out how to be a missionary church in this moment. The backlash of that is, well, it's not all about growth. Well, it has to be about growth. It has to be about spiritual growth and numerical growth. Like, maybe it, I get happy when, when one person tells me this amazing story of hope.

Yay, that is amazing. But it is one person more than it was yesterday. You know, it's like. Everybody's like, well, I don't want it all, but yeah, well, that's just a way of deflecting the work, I think. And I, I, I think we have to lean into this difficult moment in a new way.

B: I'm fairly certain that this is the first time I've heard the creed described as a bungee jump. And I love that metaphor, um, both in terms of what it means for the Christian walking through the world and the life of those of us who've chosen ministry as a path of service. It does often feel like a bungee jump. It does often feel like a lot of vulnerability is required to be of service in the world, and to be really honest about often how we fall short in meeting the challenges and the hungers of the world.

And this quest for vulnerability has been a big part of Brene Brown's writing, and I know her work has really influenced you and your diocese and your ministry and, uh, Brene Brown, sociologist and researcher and leadership expert, maybe one of the most famous Episcopalians on the planet. So, um, can you share a little bit about how her work has touched your life and the life of your diocese?

BA: As we have faced a number of different challenges in Texas to do new work and think in new ways and bind ourselves together, the work of Brene Brown, especially early on, about the time that it was hitting the TED Talk circuit. So, I mean, this is all kind of going on at a similar moment. But, of course, she was involved at the cathedral and certainly her theology or spirituality comes out of the book of common prayer.

In her own work, she would describe that connection of being open hearted as part of a gift in, in our particular style of prayer that resonated with her. We were wrestling with unity and Mission, which was a three-year process that I had begun to deal with allowing congregations here to marry LGBTQ people to, at that time, blessings, but we knew marriage was coming. So, you know, we wanted to do it all at once and kind of get that done. But we were caucusing and building a group and like moving through this whole process. We all had to learn how to be vulnerable, that part of the wars, the culture wars, and even the political wars today in this country around issues, which bring issues into church in weird ways, was that actually individuals had to learn to be vulnerable with one another, and that the priests and deacons had to do that first. That it was going to be very hard to be open and welcoming with folks. Even if we were going to withhold a more traditional stance on marriage, we were going to need some sense of what it meant to be vulnerable and leadership. What does it mean to be in the arena together as clergy?

And so we, we're fortunate enough at that time to be able to get on her calendar in such a way to have her team. And we worked for months to bring her in. And it was really an important moment in the diocese because there was a congealing. We had almost all of our, it was not required. I just, uh, I don't do

requirements here. Uh, it's very sparingly, but I said it was necessary for us to lean towards each other and I was hoping they would do it. So almost all of the full time clergy came. I mean, and there was room for about five others around the country who wanted really, really wanted to come through the training. And many of those folks went on to be trained and to do training. They're longer, a workout of that has flourished in lots of different ways and consulting and coaching and finding them with business leaders and others doing different things that started with that work.

We are right now at a point where over two thirds of the clergy have come since I've been the bishop. I've been the bishop here for 15 years. So they were thinking again about a time that maybe we need to do that. And how are we going to build relationships for the challenging part of the future? And, you know, I just think that's an important piece in any form of leadership. I think you have to have cadres of supporters that gather around you who will tell you the truth, but also when they don't agree, can say things honestly, and yet support you.

Those are disagreement does not mean a lack of support and care for each other. Those are not equal. I think sometimes we think they are, but I didn't see that in the gospel. I didn't see. I didn't see Jesus saying, okay, once you get everybody together, if you, they'll agree with you, you're good to go. And I just, I just don't see that. So, you know, I think part of what she brings to the Episcopal church is a reminder of our, our historic breath and willingness to do things together, to love each other and to support each other in our ministry, especially for clergy and other leaders. I mean, that's how she fit into the, uh, longer place and so, and so did many others. I mean, I've, we have a lot of wonderful people in the Diocese of Texas who have helped us in many different ways.

B: Thank you. And I'm wondering if you can share with us a glimmer of hope, which I, I presume you're experiencing all the time, but what's one recent experience of hope that's, that's animating you these days?

BA: I just recorded a bunch of little, short video casts that we have been working on to present a story of hope about the church because people ask this of me a lot, you know, what gives you hope about the church? And that what I found is that there's so much that gives me hope. That if I could sit down and just record it, we're so anxious.

Anxiety has gone through the roof since COVID for a lot of different reasons, but our sociologists and folks looking at our culture, especially in the US are telling us that. And so one of the. The key pieces of finding hope is to remove

that sense of nostalgia and rather kind of find for us something real that's happening now. And I think that's happening in all of our lives. There's that great Eucharistic prayer in our tradition about opening our eyes so we can see God's hand at the world about us. And that's a fantastic daily process. And, of course, you know, rooted in the AA tradition, Al Anon tradition, the sense of gratitude, right?

So, if you don't have hope, it's hard to have gratitude. Finding those stories of hope help with the gratitude piece. So, I actually think this may be one of the most important questions you've asked during our time together. So, here's my answer. From Sunday, I visited congregation, and that congregation was trying to figure out how to reach families in their neighborhood. Oh, wow. That sounds like everybody. What they found out was they had a couple of soccer coaches and cheerleading coaches and some folks in karate or so over the last two years, they have begun a soccer league of their own, which has over 70 kids from the neighborhood in it. And, uh, another 50 attending Wednesday night, uh, karate and parallel cheerleading practice at their church.

Now you think, okay, so that just seems like cheerleading and karate, yes, but it's all, it's not hosting that. So there's a difference here. It's not a renting the space to groups and others are not renting their field to a soccer group. They're not renting their space to cheerleaders. What they're doing is hosting those folks in their congregation, and they're running the groups themselves and providing hospitality and pastoral care by the priest around that. And so people are now beginning to come to church and to find their way into Bible classes, prayer classes, confirmation, reception, and baptism.

And so. That's an amazing thing. And this congregation has one priest, has about 250 people. So it's a midsize congregation, a large size for many of our congregations. But one of the things that I hear so often is, Oh, you know, we would do so much better if it weren't for soccer or insert sports name, and here's a congregation who said, well, why can't we do it? And you know what? It's an amazing thing. There are no soccer games on Sunday morning. They all start at one o'clock, right? So if you start your own group and you say, this is when we can play, other people will show up to play soccer with you.

It's just a great example of, instead of being weighed down by cultural pressure, kind of saying, okay, well, what do we have? That is an asset, a gift, a spiritual gift, right? Think about the kaleidoscope, uh, gifts assessment, right? Okay, so we have some gifts, like how do we use that and bring that to our mission and our ministry in a way that doesn't just bring people on campus but helps them see who we are.

That's a great story of hope, and I would challenge everybody listening. Why don't we try this week finding one story of hope just one write it down. Say thank you lord for that vision of hope and then the next week why see if you find two and I guarantee before you Get going, you're going to find hope every day, and it's going to be little things. It's going to be somebody who's nice when they give you a cup of coffee, or somebody who does a favor for somebody else, but you get to witness it because they thought it was private, but you saw, I mean, oh my gosh, so much goodness.

B: Bishop Andy Doyle, thank you so much for your leadership, for your ministry in the church. Be assured of our prayers, and we hope you can visit us at Berkeley Divinity School here at Yale sometime real soon.

BA: I'm looking forward to it. I'm looking forward to it.

B: Thank you for listening to the Leader's Way at Yale podcast. Join us in our work to heal the healers, care for the caregivers, and support the spiritual leaders who are transforming our world in compassion, justice, and love online at berkeleydivinityschool.yale.edu.