

Becca Stevens: The best way I can think of it is to say it for all of us who are do-gooders and pastors and advocates and allies and whatever the word is and survivors ourselves is the world needs hosts, not hero, H-O-S-T-S hosts. You know that people want to be the hero of their own story. All of us on this podcast want to be the hero of our own story. And so how do we be good hosts? And that just means you're offering resources and time and space for people to do that healing work.

Brandon and Hannah: Hi, I'm Brandon Nappi. Hi, I'm Hannah Black. And we're your hosts on The Leader's Way, an audio pilgrimage from Berkeley Divinity School, the Episcopal Seminary at Yale University. On this journey, we reflect on what matters most in life as we talk about all things spirituality, innovation, leadership, and transformation.

H: Hey, Brandon.

B: Hey, Hannah. How's it going?

H: It's going super well. I am in full swing when it comes to Christmas shopping. I realize that's not very spiritual of me to say. It's a little bit consumerist, but I love Christmas shopping because it gives me a chance to reflect on the things that I love about the people I love and then get them the perfect gift. And I have to say with this recording coming up, I headed over to Thistle Farms online and found not one, not two, but three gifts that I couldn't live without for my mom. And we all know moms are so difficult to shop for. So this is me saying, "If you haven't gotten a gift for your mom, head to Thistle Farms." And I think you have to order today to get it by Christmas by the time this episode is dropping, so run, don't walk.

B: You are a marketing genius. Were there marketing requirements in your theology PhD program, Hannah?

H: Absolutely not. But what are we doing but marketing the Lord as theologians and preachers?

B: I think there's plenty of theologians who haven't gotten the memo. But I digress. That's a different episode.

H: Sure is.

B: Well, I mean, there's a couple things I want to say. I mean, Thistle Farms is this incredible ministry. I'll say a little bit more about it, but there's often this disconnect around Christmas time between where we buy gifts from and the sustainability of the supply chain. And we're sort of giving lots of our dollars to make big, rich businesses even richer. But this is an incredible ministry and nonprofit that does really powerful work among survivors in the Nashville area.

So one of the things that I appreciate, Hannah, is that you are cultivating the skill of gift giving because gift giving is a skill and doesn't come naturally to all of us. It's a really bad present where someone clearly didn't put any time or thought into it. It does have an impact. So that's

really sweet. I want to be a better gift giver in the new year.

H: Yeah, yeah. I'm also a list maker. So my gift giving begins with like a brainstorming list.

B: Wow. Are there spreadsheets involved? No, no. I'm crazy, but not that crazy. It's like first I make a list of all. Now that I'm saying this out loud, maybe I should feel embarrassed. First, I make a list of the things I know this person loves. And then I make a list of potential gifts related to those things. Wow. Like I thought this was normal until we had this conversation.

B: This is a level of love and care and intention that, gosh, I'm aspiring to right now. I'm feeling a little guilty.

H: That's very kind. You could be shaming me, but you're lifting me up.

B: I think there needs to be an episode on thoughtful gift giving. And then listeners could like share the episode with people in their lives.

H: Those people who always get you the worst things.

B: Well, I mean, I guess this is a lovely segue to talking about the person who's sort of responsible for all these gifts, both like literally potential Christmas gifts, which we hope you'll very thoughtfully and intentionally get for your loved ones, but also tremendous levels of spiritual gifts. So, this is Reverend Becca Stevens, who is an Episcopal priest, contemplative teacher, entrepreneur, retreat leader, author, and can we call her an Episcopal celebrity? I mean, she is.

H: Oh yeah.

B: She is a bit of a celebrity. And I'm going to read some of the things that she's been up to over the years and it's ridiculously impressive. And I was just overwhelmed by how down to earth she is, how accessible, humble, just somebody who wants to like get it done for the Lord and create a more peaceful, just loving world. Love that. Yeah. I am just really excited for this conversation. So let me just share a little bit about her. She experienced the death of her father and experienced and survived child abuse when she was just at the young age of five. And she longed as she writes so beautifully to open a sanctuary for survivors and longed to create a loving community. And she did just that in 1997. She opened the first sanctuary for just five survivors and four years later it had grown. And in addition to creating this place for folks in recovery, she realized that there was sort of an economic piece of this, that she needed to help women become financially self-sufficient. And so, they began making candles in the church basement. And in 2001 Thistle Farms Social Enterprises were born. So, this is a nonprofit social enterprise dedicated to helping women survivors recover and heal from prostitution, trafficking, addiction, and they make... Well, you were just on the site, Hannah.

H: Indeed.

B: What are some of the things?

H: There are so many things. I thought it was just gonna be candles and soaps and things like that, but there are like baskets, coasters, blankets, like the list just goes on and on and on. I literally was like, I could get something for everybody on here. It's very impressive. And they're from all different places, which is very cool and special.

B: So in addition to this work, Becca has been sought after as a spiritual leader, just a wisdom figure. She's been on the PBS NewsHour, The Today Show, CNN, ABC World News. She's been featured in the New York Times. She's been a White House Champion of Change. She was named as the Humanitarian of the Year by the Small Business Council of America. She's in the Tennessee Women's Hall of Fame. We could take up the next hour just sort of listing her credits, but she is as humble and down to earth as they come, a vibrant radiant light. I'm just so thankful that we could sit down with her for a few minutes.

And Becca is coming to the Northeast to lead a retreat in May of 2025. So, this is just my little bit of a commercial. If you enjoy this conversation, you can hang out with Becca for a few days on the beach here in Connecticut, on retreat in spring of 2025.

H: That is wonderful. One question for you, Brandon, before we really jump in. Becca is a native to Connecticut, right?

B: Well, I think we should claim that. I don't know if she just adds it up that way, but she's born in Connecticut.

H: Born in Connecticut. My question is what do you call, I've only lived in Connecticut for one year. You've been here many more than one year.

B: Oh my gosh, almost a half century. And I feel like I'm flunking my Connecticut identity. Is it a Connecticutian?

H: This is my question!!! Is it a Connecticutian? Sometimes around the house, we call it a Connecticutie. I think we made that up. I heard somebody refer to herself as not a native nutmegger recently.

B: I've heard the Appalachian nutmegger. Somehow, I just don't identify with that little spice somehow.

H: I see.

B: But I'm going to go with Connecticutie. I don't know if you can decide that you're a Connecticutie or someone has to decide that for you. We are raising some of the most urgent questions of our time, Hannah, on the podcast.

H: It's true.

B: Which is why, by the way, we have a thousand listeners. Thank you. Thank you for listening.

H: Thanks to everybody.

B: Yeah, so we hit our next milestone, thanks for listening.

H: Yeah, so exciting.

B: Enjoy this conversation with Becca.

B: One of the things that I love to ask people about is this encounter with the sacred. Do you have an earliest memory of a moment like that?

Becca (BS): I have one billion memories. And I don't want to tell you the first one. I want to tell you my latest one that's blowing my mind. This is crazy. When I tell you this, it is insane. Is that okay?

Brandon (B): The more insane, the better.

BS: Yeah, you can edit anything out. So this summer I decided, oh my gosh, I really want to make do something in the Holy Land, like create some product in this global movement for women's freedom for women who are refugees in the Holy Land. And we contacted the women that had gone through the Lutheran Artisan School in Bethlehem. They're potters. Rasha was the head of it. And I said, look, it'd be so beautiful to have these chalice and patents, these holy relics from holy hands in the Holy Land. And I would love to think about selling them for like Lent of 2024. And I worked with another woman who was a designer in the UK with a group we had started working with refugees in Greece. Her name was Abby Hewitt. Anyway, didn't hear anything. At the end of September, I got an email that said they're done. We've made 300 chalice and patents were done. And I was like, okay, well, I haven't even seen a prototype. You can't just do that. And then send me a bill in my head. I'm thinking this, then I'm like, what is wrong with you? Just say yes. These are women who have gone through a lot. Just take their chalice and patents without ever seeing them. And you'll be okay.

October 4th, I get the first hundred chalice and patents from the West Bank. Then of course, Hamas bombs three days later, everybody's fleeing chaos ensues. And I'm like, Oh, well, that's it. We'll get 100 chalice and patents. These are now sacred relics. Like the rest are going to be gone. Some courier still in the West Bank during all this chaos, then shipped me about two weeks ago, another 150 chalice and patents that he got out. I unloaded these boxes and I looked at the box and I'm like, are you kidding me that the universal sign for fragile is a chalice?

It's unbelievable. It says handle with care, this chalice handle with care. And I'm like, we have gotten 150 in the middle of a war.

Clay chalice and patents marked fragile as a sign of what peace and love looks like in this world. It blew me away. I will now sell these with the most reverence I've ever sold any product from Thistle Farms and send every penny back for women who are staying put and doing this work of healing. So we started this with no idea that there was going to be a war. Obviously in July, we had no idea. All of this comes through and it's like, I now for the first time in my life, I'm really looking at the word and embracing the idea that fragile is where the sacred and the beauty lie. Oh my gosh. It's an amazing story. I'm just sort of marinating in that. I know. I'm so grateful and so in love with the women and everybody right now is pretty safe. Two people have left because there was violence right in front of where they were staying at the camp. But I just feel like I got this tiny glimpse and this tiny hope into there's still the possibility of peace in the midst of war and there's still wholeness in the midst of violence. And I'm just blown away by it.

H: I wonder if you could tell us the story of Thistle Farms.

BS: So Thistle Farms started in 1997. It is started with one house and we just thought we can do better than what's being offered there in a more loving and compassionate way with women who are survivors of trafficking, exploitation, addiction, who have on average first known violence, sometime between the age of 7 and 11 and first hit the streets around 15 years old. And so the model we created in '97 really was based on a Benedictine model of radical hospitality. And the way that it was translated for us is two years rent free with no authority in the house because if women were survivors of so much trauma, childhood trauma, sexual childhood trauma, you know, authority is like the biggest trigger. So we just wanted to say nobody will live in the house except the people who are part of this community.

So it started and it was great. And then we were like, if we're talking about love, we have to be concerned about women's economic well-being. And that's when we started Thistle Farms and started manufacturing and making our own company together. Fast forward 27 years and we're in about 36 countries. Largely due to the National Episcopal Church, we have the largest national network of homes for women survivors. We're in about 60 cities now. Wow. I mean, I don't even know how many dioceses that translates to that I've gone and spoken to and priests who have taken up this cause and done beautiful work in Oklahoma and Omaha and New Orleans and North Carolina, New Jersey, and Washington. I mean, everywhere people are realizing that this is a beautiful way to love and care for women.

B: What's coming to mind is this distinction that I've heard you make or I've read you make in the past around ministry with versus ministry for. And there was something in your story which led you to realize this is not a transactional capitalistic exchange, right? But because you are in relationship and you were doing work with people in a kind of partnership model and a relational model, it inspired you to do things differently. And so I wonder if you could just sort of flesh out what that distinction has meant for you, ministry with versus ministry for, and how that practically leads you to make different sorts of decisions like the one you just made with the chalice.

BS: That's a great, great reflection and a great thought on it. And what's coming to my mind is maybe two years ago, we were hiring a marketing person for Thistle Farms and we were hiring this guy. We were interviewing him out of Chicago and he said, you know, my whole thing is just really empower women who are survivors. And I said, well, it's really funny you say that in a way when you think about it because the women of Thistle Farms, the graduates grew this company, this manufacturing company that now sells millions of dollars worth of product a year. They grew it. There was no one else. We did it together. We figured out the marketing, we figured out the strategy, we figured out the sales. And because of our hard work, we're offering you this job. So if you think about it, the women are empowering you. Like, I don't know where you get off thinking you're empowering them. And that's the thing. It's like, it's just this presumption, I think, when you think you're doing something for someone, it's like the best way I can think of it to say it for all of us who are do-gooders and pastors and advocates and allies and whatever the word is and survivors ourselves is the world needs hosts, not hero. H-O-S-T-S, hosts. You know that people want to be the hero of their own story. All of us on this podcast want to be the hero of our own story. And so how do we be good hosts? And that just means you're offering resources and time and space for people to do that healing work. And it's not just doing it with people, by the way. It's also with the idea for me at least to say, I don't even get the privilege of crying for something anymore. I have to weep with, I can't even cry for it. For war or for the violence or the stories I've heard, it's like the best I can do is sit with people and weep with them and just say, I'm not pretending that, oh my gosh, my heart is breaking for you, but it's breaking with you.

B: So I'm wondering in those early days, as you think about your leadership, the experiment, it sounds like it was, you're following intuition and the spirit and the need and the community, we think a lot about leadership here and we learn sometimes most from our mistakes. I wonder, is there a mistake that you feel like you can share, that you're willing to share with us, a learning that felt really important?

BS: No, I don't know that I made. I didn't really ever make a mistake in my life that I can recall. Just teasin'. But what I will say is what was powerful to me in the beginning was realizing, so I got ordained in 1991 in the Episcopal Church. And quickly I realized that because of the fact that, so my dad was an Episcopal priest, actually came from Yale. He was killed by a drunk driver. My mom was 35 years old with five kids. And then basically the whole family system fell apart for a while. And my abuse began in a church with the senior warden of the mission and it began in the church. And I think for me, I had some fear and anger and all that stuff that goes with it, along with really wanting to create community that was safe.

So not long after I was ordained, I realized, you know what? I really want to work with women on the streets and women coming out of prison. And I felt so at home, we opened our first house and one of the rules was you couldn't smoke in the house. So the women and I would go in the back of the house and we would smoke on the porch. And I was like, I feel so much more at home here than I do with my clergy friends in a clergy meeting. There was no judgment, there was no fear. And it was this realization that I'm probably not going to flourish in a church. This is so embarrassing. So it's not more a mistake. It's more of a lifestyle that I didn't think was

conducive. And I was like, I just feel home here. I feel safe. I feel safe with the women. I feel safe with community that looks like this where we get what the rule is and we'll smoke out back.

And that was, I think, the beginning for me of saying, I think I'm really going to try to stay in the church, but work outside the church.

B: Yeah, thank you for that. I mean, I'm thinking about the seminarians who might be listening right now who have some real discernment to do around where their ministry will be. And obviously we need leaders in the church and we need people to imagine themselves working alongside the church, adjacent to the church, outside the church, and create the kind of spiritual communities that can serve people.

BS: Well, I believe it is the church still. You're talking about church buildings or church institutions. And I think that the way I like to encourage people, first of all, is to say what we are is a mission with a church. We're not a church with a mission. So if the mission is to love, you can do church all kinds of ways. So it's not... So I think you mean the institutional structure.

H: Right, like a parish or something.

B: Yeah. That's right.

BS: You mean a church. You mean a parish.

B: I mean a parish. Yeah. I mean, I think there's a lot... There's sometimes some pressure that seminarians feel toward parish ministry, as beautiful as that is.

BS: Well, hell yeah, because that's where you get your health insurance.

H: This is a good point.

BS: And the world needs us to reimagine what spiritual community looks like in the world. And for a lot of folks, it doesn't look like parish community.

H: Yeah. Well, and in fact, we have a whole cohort of people who are already clergy members who are working on innovative ministry projects, is what it's called through The Leader's Way.

BS: Do you know, y'all sound like you work at Berkeley?

H: Haha, well what I'm going to ask you...

BS: I mean like the language of reimagining cohorts, working towards innovation. It's like, what are y'all saying? What is it that y'all are telling me? And then I think, oh, I can translate it into real world language, which is basically, we have outliers.

H: Yeah.

BS: You know, who are entrepreneurs, spiritual entrepreneurs doing fun work. That's it. And it's like, yes, that is... It's these boundaries in this structure that sometimes I just want to break it open and say, nobody's going to think outside the box until we live outside of it. And so how do we then invite people to live outside our boxes that we've created? This is what healing is. This is what justice is. This is what evangelism is. And it's like, it all blows up. It's all a part of one idea of like, we want to be a healing community, whether that is happening Sunday morning or Saturday afternoon makes very little difference in the lives of someone.

So for me, what I would like to encourage, if you're saying there's divinity school students listening to this is just say, where does your curiosity take you? First of all, where is your heart leading you? Where is it that you find yourself fearful of? Where is it that you seem to kind of come alive and you feel ready to go? What makes you angry? Find out those things. And then you are going to be in that calling of your life. If you follow those things, instead of saying like, we have to define it and then figure out the rest on the back end.

It's like, if when I was listening to my heart, it's like, I know I don't need to go to the library. I need to go to prison. That's what's speaking to me. And that's true for other people too. So it's like, I'm not going to apologize that I don't want to go to the library.

H: Totally.

B: What was it like to learn those spiritual entrepreneurial skills? Because I presume that seminary did not teach you those skills. I mean, so where did you go to learn those lessons?

BS: So here's what I would say to anybody that is running a part of a divinity school anywhere is like seeing how you can become friends with the business school. Why is love not in the business school? Love should be a topic. Love changes marketplaces. It changes workforces. The divinity school has so much to teach the business school and vice versa.

We don't have to be afraid of the marketplace. We don't have to be afraid of commerce. We don't have to be afraid of money. Those are really great tools. And it's taken me so long to understand like, what does it mean as a love entrepreneur to shake up the marketplace and to say, how is it that on a global market chain, the most devalued person is the producer, which keeps millions of women in poverty. And we don't change that. If we started raising the value of the producer, decreasing the percentages and decreasing the number of links in the market change, things would be different. Women will be lifted out of poverty. There will be less violence, all of those things. And until we can say that's what love is teaching us.

That's the calling of love as well as our spiritual teaching on Sunday morning. So let's go out, let's be in the marketplace, be engaged with it because everybody spends money in the marketplace. I mean, I don't know anybody that doesn't. I really don't.

H: This is making me like think back to all these church teachings growing up. And of course, like growing up, I was a child, I did not have a job, but I was aware of all of these adult-ey church groups that were like, "Have a small group and talk about how to bring your faith into the workplace." And now hearing you talk, that seems so backwards. If it's about discerning, even something like a calling to bring church into the world in this way that we don't always imagine but makes so much sense.

BS: Oh my gosh, I love that.

H: So you said love entrepreneur, which I love. And it's making me think, can you tell us about the motto love heals and how that came about, how that fits into Thistle Farms?

BS: I can. You guys are masters at this, by the way, helping people understand not just the sacraments, but sacramental life with the practices you have and the way you structure your community. And I always go back to the idea that if we only ate consecrated bread, we would probably starve. Do you know, like, yeah, you have to go to church at, I don't know, a thousand times, 10,000 times to eat a loaf of bread. And it's beautiful to eat it a bite at the time. It's beautiful to have a sip of wine at a time, but also then to start learning how to live sacramentally where you give thanks over all your bread and bless all the wine. And for me, it was going, oh, wait, that means that like all the sacraments, not just communion, we can live sacramentally.

And then I started realizing that means that all the seven sacraments we acknowledge in the church, they're really all reflections of one sacrament that's healing. So baptism, communion, marriage, death, whatever, unction, ordination, all of them, it's like, oh my gosh, these are a way to begin to live sacramentally into healing. And so I kind of boiled down the sacraments into the idea of healing and then love being the whole basis for our lives and our creator, the beginning and the end, all of it.

So the idea of love heals for me kind of sums up theology and the two words that kind of incorporates what I hope, what I long for, what I think was the dream to begin with, and what is the practice.

B: I mean, as you have such a front row seat to not only lots of healing, but I'm sure lots of pain to make love the center of your work means to have a front row seat to a lot of hard things. I wonder what keeps you hopeful. Do you have something that you keep in mind and in your heart that buoys you?

BS: Absolutely. And again, that yo ask such beautiful soft questions. It's so kind of yo. But I would say that the thing that is so hopeful and joyful and grateful and all of that, it's not the horror stories you hear. You can hear horror stories. Open your phone up in the morning. You have a global horror story just coming into your lap. That's not that big a deal. We're numb to that. That's not anything any of us are not used to. And the saddest thing for me is the numbness to it.

But what gives me hope and joy is beyond like move that aside, sitting in community with women. I don't care if you're in a refugee camp, you're in prison, you're in the circle at Thistle Farms, wherever. You're going to hear laughter. I have not gone anywhere where I haven't heard women together doing this work that are not both. We'd be willing to weep with each other, but willing to laugh. You know, there's joy, there's hope. And I get to soak it in and be in those circles.

You know, I was just in Nepal this year. I was in Kenya. I was in Botswana. I was in Canada. I was in Tucson, Arizona with a group of women asylum seekers. I was in Poland. You know, I mean, I've been around and it's like, it has been the biggest gift to watch amazing women find joy together in the creating, taking their places, healers, even in the midst of their struggles. They understand they are the ministers and healers that need to happen. And the whole truth is, you know, you rape women, you kill community. But when we invest with women, we heal community. It's not just about individual women. It's about understanding our families and our lives and our community. So I'm super hopeful. I'm more hopeful than ever. Isn't that crazy?

H: I love it.

BS: We have Zooms every week with women who are knitting from freaking bunkers and they will fill you with hope and their strength. And there's like, you know, oh, we're going to make 500 education little kits for 500 kids that are coming into Kiev from Eastern Ukraine and do all this amazing work. They're amazing women.

H: How would you articulate what you're hopeful for?

BS: Oh, I'm hopeful that love heals and continues to heal in this world and that there is a growing movement of women who are taking their place not to get over what's happened to them, but to dig deeper than what's happened to them to speak about love. That's what I'm hopeful about.

B: So before you go and get back to your important work of healing in the world, I wonder, would you be willing to be our personal Christmas gift consultant?

BS: Yes, I would.

B: What are some of your favorite things at Thistle Farms this Advent and Christmas season so that we can love on our people?

BS: I love that you're asking me that. Obviously, if you are connected to a church, the best gift you could give the church, the priest is expensive, but we do have, you know, close to 200 left chalices and patens from the Holy Land hand painted by the women in Bethlehem, Palestinian women in Bethlehem that went, you know, through the Lutheran college there to learn this beautiful trade. So it's \$500 for this handmade set of a chalice and patent, but for a church, you know, it comes with a laminated card that tells the whole story of the women and the hope for

peace in that part of the world. That's one of my favorites.

The second thing is we have a brand-new justice candle at Thistle Farms. It's a partnership between Homeboys, Thistle Farms, and EJI with Equal Justice Initiative. So Greg Boyle and Brian Stevenson and I got together and we decided to create one collaborative candle for this holiday season. It's called the Justice Candle.

And then I will also say we have 15 different kits. It makes it super easy to shop at Thistle Farms. It'll have a global product. It might have a body lotion, whatever, but for everybody that says our work at Thistle Farms inspires them, you know, if you gave this as a gift for Christmas, you know, it doesn't make sense to say we inspire you and then you go buy your stuff from Target. It's like invest in this if it is inspiring and share the story. That is how this grows. I think 70% of people who buy our products give them as gifts. I mean, Hannah, you were talking about that. It's all gifts, but it's, that's our evangelism. These products are our evangelism. So I would be grateful.

And I love Berkeley. I love y'all. And I love the hope of this pregnant pause of Advent and hope that people, you know, celebrate Thistle Farms this Christmas.

H: Thank you so, so much for sharing your time with us. This has been a gift to me and it'll be a gift to our listeners. And then they can go buy their gifts from Thistle Farms.

B: Amen. Thank you so much, Becca. Thank you for all you do. Our prayers are with you and we look forward to you visiting your birthplace, which we discovered reading your bio. So come on back to New Haven and we'll take you out for pizza because that's what we do in New Haven.

H: There you go.

BS: You guys are beautiful and you are kind and you are loving and I am grateful.

B&H: Thank you for listening to The Leader's Way. We hope you were encouraged and inspired. To learn more about this episode, visit our website at berkeleydividity.yale.edu. Rate and review us and follow the podcast to make sure you never miss an episode. Follow Berkeley at Yale on Instagram for quotes from the podcast and more. Until next time, the Lord be with you.