

The Leader's Way Podcast

Episode: Christianity in American Politics with Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove

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B: Hi, I'm Brandon Nappi.

H: Hi, I'm Hannah Black.

B: 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: Hannah, how is it going?

H: What is up? It's going well. How are you?

B: Honestly, I am still dreaming about a mystical experience that I had that I'm trying to get back.

H: Pray tell.

B: And that was our visit to Zanelis.

H: Yes! Okay here's the thing we were so caught up in the amazing food, the amazing conversation that we never actually debriefed. And if you listened to the "Hunkering with Brandon and Hannah" episode, you know this is my favorite pizza place in New Haven but it's controversial. It's special special because it's not New Haven style pizza, it's Neapolitan style pizza and I need to know what you thought of it.

B: It was strong. It was very strong. And here's the thing I feel like pizza is that quintessential food that belongs to the people. It's simple, there's just a few ingredients. And so I'm actually a kind of person that wants to demystify pizza. Like it shouldn't be special-special. There shouldn't be just like one or two places that do this better than everyone else.

H: We should all have access to good pizza.

B: We should, thank you. Right? Comrades? Like start the revolution. This is my Marxist gloss on pizza. No, so like every neighborhood should have great pizza that's sort of distinctive and like ... that's what I love about New Haven. Of course, we're incredibly spoiled. Yes, Zanelis delivered.

H: Yeah.

B: The crust. Oh my gosh, it had that nice char.

H: I know.

B: But not too much char because some places in New Haven go a little overboard on the char.

H: Char heavy. Yeah. Mm-hmm.

B: Not too much sauce, fresh ingredients. Oh my gosh, I was in my happy place. Thank you for introducing me to the new place. Zanelis, yeah.

H: Delicious. Delicious. I'm already looking forward to hearing about all of your culinary adventures when you go to Italy soon.

B: It is coming in a few weeks. Yeah, yeah. There will be a lot of stories; you'll have to contain me. But I mean, can you do anything but love a place that says, "Good pizza's finally come to New Haven?" Is that their little tagline?

H: It's strong vibes. I have respect.

B: Maybe the new tagline for the podcast should be "Finally, intelligent conversation comes to Yale." Would that be too much?

H: I'm not sure that's what we're adding to the conversation at Yale. We're adding something that's ... special special or maybe it's just like "Finally, special special has come to Yale."

B: Yeah, I think that's probably right.

H: Well, here at Yale, here in the US of A, we're in an election year and I feel some anxiety about that. I think a lot of people feel some anxiety about that. That's why I'm really excited to share the wisdom of our friend and colleague, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove today. For those of you who aren't familiar with him, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove is a spiritual writer, a preacher, and a community cultivator. He serves with William Barber at Yale University's Center for Public Theology and Public Policy. He's their assistant director for

partnerships and fellowships. Jonathan lives with his family at the Rutba House, a house of hospitality in Durham, North Carolina. And he comes up to Connecticut to work with us here at Yale Divinity School. Yeah, I'm really excited to share the wisdom of Jonathan Wilson Hartgrove with our listeners who might be wondering how to talk about the election, how to think about the election, questions like that, and how politics and our faith should kind of go hand in hand in our lives. I feel like I learned a lot from him.

H: Well, welcome to the podcast.

B: Jonathan, we're so thankful that you're here.

J: Well, thanks for having me. It's good to talk.

H: So I know it's 2024, the election's on a lot of our minds. I spent the morning thumbing through, again, your book, *The Revolution of Values, Reclaiming Public Faith for the Common Good*, and that was published right before the 2020 election. So I'm wondering if your work leading up the 2020 election has influenced the way you're thinking about the 2024 election. Do you think you have any perspective you can share with us?

B: Help us, please.

H: That's like a giant question to be question number one, but it's the burning question.

J: Yeah, I wrote *Revolution of Values* before the 2020 election because I knew that the vast network of organizations that had shaped my life and had targeted communities like the one I grew up in, in order to use faith for a very particular political agenda, I knew that those organizations were going to be in full force in 2020. And I wanted the church to have a resource to at least understand what was happening.

H: Yeah, yeah.

J: So that was a big motivation for writing it. I think a lot of the conversation about Christian nationalism, particularly since the January 6th insurrection, I mean, I think it has highlighted that part of things. But the other reason I wrote the book, and why I do continue to have hope in this field, is because I had spent time, as we were building the Poor People's Campaign around the country, with communities that were putting a very different kind of faith into action in public. And I wanted to give churches a resource to say, "Well, how do those people read the Bible? What are the questions they're asking? What do they see in the scriptures?" I wanted it to as much be a sort of *invitation* as a warning. I think the warning has come through pretty clear about the dangers of Christian nationalism. It seems to me, at least in mainstream media now, it's fairly well known.

I don't think people realize that there's such a robust and concrete alternative.

H: Yeah.

J: And I think that leads to a lot of confusion because the tactic of folks who have been investing in this is to say, "When you attack Christian nationalism, you're attacking Christians." Right. And so, "Be afraid. You're going to be persecuted by these people who are against Christians." When, as a matter of fact, probably the greatest force against Christianity is this attempt to use it for a political agenda that really takes a lot of people away from the core tenets of their faith.

H: Yeah. Let me ask you kind of a follow-up question to dig a little bit deeper. Can you tell us a little bit or share with our listeners really how you think about the conservative, white evangelical communities' vision of the world and understanding of themselves at war with American culture? And I think in the book, you also use the term the "American Cowboys' vision of the world" and then help us understand what the alternative is in reclaiming public faith.

J: Yeah. John Wayne was created by Hollywood. And in a similar way, I think this vision of Christianity, this imagination of Christianity as a culture that is persecuted by the so-called liberals but needs to reclaim something that's lost and hold on to power in order to put values that look backwards to some imagined past into practice today, I think that was also created, and it was created through a marketing campaign. And I grew up in what I think anybody would call a conservative, white community and in the church in that place. A lot of my own heartache around this is that I think in sort of selling the John Wayne version of the Bible to my people, this religious right, moral majority, 40-year campaign of white Christian nationalism really did attack the faith of my grannies. That ain't what my grannies believed. It's not what they taught me. It's not what kept them alive. It's not why people sacrificed what little they had to build that church and to take care of and love people in that community. That's not what it was about for them.

These people who had a bunch of money decided that they could use a lot of the cultural assumptions of our community in order to keep people that they wanted in power and pass policies that would really mostly benefit rich people and in the long run actually hurt us, right? It hurt public education funding in our community. It hurt farm aid in our community and things like that. So in a lot of ways, I want to distinguish between the people who've been sold this garbage and the marketing campaign behind it because I think that ain't about faith at all. Really, it's not. It's about what people thought they could use to hold on and make more money.

B: And what parts of the gospel need to be surgically amputated for this Christian nationalist vision in your estimation? What gets lost in this approach to Christianity?

J: Well, Jesus, for one.

H: That feels important. [laughter]

J: Jesus is very inconvenient if you've decided you need to use people's faith and religious tradition in order to get them to vote for less taxes and more guns, which has essentially been the sustained vision over the past four decades. You got trouble with the fellow that said, "If you live by the sword, you're going to die by the sword," and a prophetic tradition that by and large seems to believe that the government has some obligation to ensure justice. There's not a lot of tax policy in the Bible, but nevertheless, however you're going to work that out, the government does have an obligation to do justice, and that's pretty biblical. So Jesus and the prophets get lost. There's a lot of talk about this values language that kind of floats above the daily realities that people live and the particular realities of the text. You don't hear people quoting Jesus a lot when they're promoting this religious nationalism. Jesus, as a matter of fact, was a great challenger of the religious nationalists of his own day. He made much of the fact that the religious leaders who were in cahoots with the politicians who were using and abusing people were actually betraying their tradition and their God. They didn't like that, of course, which is why they conspired to have him killed, but that was Jesus's message.

H: Let's zero in on values a little bit. We've talked a little bit about the traditional values, what are often called Christian values that are used in political speak, but then your book is called *Revolution of Values*, which comes from the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King calling for the revolution of values, which you talk about in the book. What is the revolution of values? Could you tell us more about that?

J: Well, the language of values, particularly in American public life, came out of the strategic thinking of the new right in the 1970s. These were people who realized that their voter base was largely white folks, but that appealing to people's race after the civil rights movement was not going to be very effective. They watched George Wallace run for president as an independent candidate. This is the guy who down in Alabama had said he was going to stand for segregation forever, and then he ran for president. He changed his language a little bit, but he was really branded by the civil rights movement as this sort of arch-racist, and that meant he couldn't win in other parts of the country.

And so, these political organizers of the new right knew nevertheless that there was a base for the politics that he was promoting in, as they said, the suburbs and the Sun Belt beyond the south. They had to figure out, "Well, how do you speak to that constituency without appealing to racism?" They said ... *values*. Values was it. To use religion rather than race as the sort of binding agent for this political coalition, that is what led people like Paul Weyrich to reach out to Jerry Falwell and other conservative ministers of the time, who notably, they knew this from the political side, these people pastored churches that in the south had started segregation academies, because when people said, "We're not going to integrate our schools in Virginia," where Jerry Falwell is from, they shut down the schools. Then ... we've all been through COVID, it lasted a lot longer than this lasted in Virginia, but when the parents had had the kids home for a while, they said, "Well, this ain't working out so well. We got to come up with something else." They said, "We'll start schools for our white kids in our churches, and they'll be private academies." The IRS had cracked down on that eventually under the Carter administration and had said, "Well, if you're going to

use your church to subvert federal integration, then you're going to lose your nonprofit status." That made these people really mad. This political organizer, Paul Weyrich, said, "Well, anger is a great way to organize people. Let's get these angry pastors on board with an agenda to take back their country, and we'll use the language of values to do that." They talked about "traditional values." They talked about "religious values." They decided then that they would use the issue of abortion to mobilize people. These same churches had not been very concerned about abortion for the five or so years since the Roe decision, but they got very invested in it when it was an organizing tool to mobilize people around these so-called values.

H: Wow. How can we think of "values?" Do we have to just throw out the word now, or is there a way that I can be talking about values in a helpful way leading up to the 2024 election, just in the political future?

J: Well, Dr. King said in the midst of a movement that was about civil rights, but also about human rights and increasingly about economic rights, as he was focusing on the need for transformative change in the United States in the late 1960s, he said we needed a revolution of values. That concept of reaching deep into our moral traditions, asking what we do really value, what we do really believe, and turning the practiced value of treating people like things, treating the earth like a resource that we can use to our own benefit, whatever the cost, that kind of valuation of the people and things around us to turn that on its head and to say, "No, actually, if we take our faith seriously, if we take seriously the fact that every person is created in the image of God, well, that has huge implications for how we treat one another interpersonally and how we treat one another in terms of policy." So Dr. King and the movement were focused on policy *violence*, how are policies hurting people, and how can we, as a society that sort of takes collective responsibility for the government and its policies, how can we mobilize ourselves to change those things and to genuinely value people in our policies?

That's what a revolution of values is about, and that's, I think, what faith-rooted movements for social change have always been about in this country, and it's an incredibly powerful resource. I mean, this is what was at the heart of the abolitionist movement. It's what was at the heart of the women's suffrage movement, the labor struggles of the early 20th century, and it had this moral center and values in its heart, and it's there for Dr. King and the civil rights movement and all that was happening then. So in so many ways, what I think this so-called religious right did was recognize the power of the forces that were changing the country so that it was more equal and accessible to everyone, and said, "We're going to take control of the thing that they're using, their power, and use it to our ends." In politics, you might just say, "Well, that's just smart because whatever your side is, you need to use whatever you can to get your vision across." But as a Christian, the thing I want to say to fellow Christians is that it's been terrible for Christianity.

If you trace the Pew data and the numbers of people who are not willing to identify with the faith that they grew up in, that number has doubled every decade since this campaign began. You don't have to talk to many people who grew up Christian but don't identify as Christian any longer to realize that when you ask them, "Well, why did you

leave?" Well, it's all these issues that people have made so-called "value issues." "I couldn't be part of a community any longer that condemns gay people like my friend or my sister. I couldn't be part of a community that supports someone like Donald Trump for president" or whatever the case. Everybody has their story, but it has everything to do with the way this campaign has pushed so-called "values issues" to represent what Christianity is in public in a way that people don't want to be associated with.

H: I've seen so much of that in my own generation. What advice or what words do you have for people who have found themselves alienated from the church because of these political agendas and events and things like that?

J: Well, I always first say to people, "Decent instincts." I want to affirm your decision to say something that is making me worse than I would be otherwise, I don't want to be part of. However, if that leads you to step away from faith or religious community altogether, I think you might miss the rich tradition that does exist that has rooted faith-based organizing and just a healthy human life for billions and billions of people for generations. We're living in a moment when people are recognizing that our institutions and our faith have been used and abused. There has to be a correction to that. Often, institutions don't change without people voting with their feet and leaving. I think there will have to be some disruption and affirm people who have the insight to say they can't be part of something that they have been part of anymore.

But I encourage people to be part of building, be part of exploring new things, and to pay attention to the communities that have always known this. This is a very white reality in American Christianity. It's very different if you spend time with African-American communities of faith. There's a much different way of negotiating politics and public life in those communities. The same can be true in some immigrant communities. So all that to say, I think it's important to be sensitive to what is taking away from true faith, but also be leaning into those discussions and those spaces and communities where people are pursuing beloved community because I think that's ultimately what Jesus came to offer us.

B: So when I think about your work at the Center for Public Theology and Public Policy, you're really standing on the third and the fourth rail in the United States, right? Religion and politics, the things that we all talk about ... never--that we shouldn't speak of. And I'm wondering if you could tell us the story of how you came to stand on the third and fourth rail. And what drew you there? And was there a moment where you had a kind of epiphany?

J: Well, this is why I'm so sympathetic with people who are in the crisis of recognizing that the communities that they come from have been co-opted and in many ways corrupted by this distorted moral narrative that we're talking about. I had that experience growing up in the Southern Baptist Church at the beginnings of the moral majority. I thought the best thing I could do for Jesus would be to become a Republican president of the United States. And so I was kind of on my way to do that as a young person, and went to page in the U.S. Senate for Strom Thurmond, who was a sort of lifelong rider of this wave. He was right there with Wallace as a segregationist. He was in the Senate. He led the

Dixiecrat movement and even ran for president as a Dixiecrat long before Wallace. But when I came along in the 90s, he had crossed over and helped many Southern Democrats cross over into the Republican Party and was very much a sort of representative leader of the kind of politics that the religious right was promoting. And when I went to work for him in his office, I mean, as a 16-year-old kid, I was in the U.S. page program, I immediately recognized that there was a tension between what we were promoting sort of every day in terms of bills and the people who were influencing the office and what I had learned in Sunday school. You know, there was just this tension between the way of Jesus and this way of power politics that I was being introduced to. And I didn't know what to make of that, because I didn't know there was another way to be Christian in public.

So I went back to my home in North Carolina disillusioned, and wondering what other way I could pursue. And that's when I met Reverend Barber, the founder of the Center. And he was a pastor in North Carolina at the time. His daddy was a pastor and he had grown up in a way of being Christian that always entailed pursuing justice in public life. That's just, you know, what his daddy preached. It's what his church taught and it's what he practiced. So he was working for the governor's office at the time in human relations. So, you know, working on, you know, issues of equity across North Carolina. And because of that role, young political hopefuls like myself were gathered at an event that the governor's office was hosting. And he was the guest speaker for the night and he came to talk to us. It was kind of a motivational speech about doing good in public. And I recognized, "This guy's a preacher." So I said, "I want you to come preach at my church." And he said, "Well, you know, you get your pastor to invite me and I'll come." But I think he figured, you know, that would never happen. This sort of white boy from out in the country, you know. He knew the kind of churches that the people like me went to. But it turned out that, you know, my good friend who I was actually at that gathering with, his daddy was the pastor of our church and he was open to it.

So he did come. And we started this relationship, and he was gracious enough to both sort of recognize where I was coming from, to tell me some of these forces that we've been talking about. I wasn't aware of them. He began to educate me about them. But also to say, look, you know, white folks and black folks have always worked together in the history of North Carolina, history of the South, often because of their faith to try to make the place better and to change society. And so I began to learn about this notion of fusion politics. You know, it goes back to the reconstruction era, when black folks were first involved in public life and stretches, you know, all the way to the work that we've done in North Carolina over the past decade of bringing people together across all kinds of lines to challenge political leadership that isn't taking the good of the whole seriously. And to say that another way of leading is possible and that if you bring together all the people who are hurt by that kind of leadership, that they're actually the majority in a democracy. So that's kind of how I ended up here doing this work. And it's a gift to get to invite other people into that.

B: I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about the center today and what you and the team and Reverend Barber are working on in the midst of this political season. And maybe

you could tell us a little bit about the journey to Yale. This still feels like a relatively recent development. We're so thrilled that you're here. So what's on the front burner these days?

J: We came to Yale because after 30 years of church ministry that, like I was saying before, was always necessarily involved in public ministry, Reverend Barber decided that he wanted to pass on what he'd learned in practice to a new generation of people who are going to be ministers and religious leaders. So coming to Yale, that has a divinity school with folks from all kinds of traditions coming, but also has other schools that are doing policy work, because this question of faith in public is not just about how do we really believe stuff that can take us into the public square, but what are we going to say when we get there? Like, what do we advocate for? What are the tools we have to change society? We wanted to be in a place where that was happening.

And it's been a great gift. We spent the past year building relationships with students and a curriculum to teach public theology. And now we're excited to be inviting people from all around the country to our first national conference. It's going to be April 7th to 9th in New Haven. And it's on, "What are the moral and spiritual issues of the 2024 presidential election?" So in a context where the language of values and the language of moral and spiritual issues has been so influenced by the distortions that we were talking about earlier, where can people go to say, "Wait a second, like, where do we invest if we don't want to be distracted by that? But we do want to put faith into practice for the kinds of things that, you know, our biblical traditions and faith traditions encourage us to work on." And we wanted to create a space for that.

So we're inviting folks together and are looking forward to that and to hopefully, you know, continuing to resource religious leaders around the country who want to be part of a movement for the common good.

H: It's just wonderful. It's so exciting. I have kind of a broader question, if that's okay. This really is a question I've been carrying with me for years now. I had heard a story about one of my family members leaving Christianity because of the way the Vietnam War was talked about from the pulpit. And as I ended up in various lay leadership positions of my own, I've really wrestled with like how to pray for world events. You know, I'm very aware that people are telling folks to vote for Trump from the pulpit, but then like anytime I have agency or I'm in a church talking about politics, my skin kind of crawls. Maybe there's not a divide between politics and the church, but to me it always felt like there was one. So how do you bring politics into the church world in a good way? And how as a Christian do you engage with politics?

J: Well, that's public theology right there.

H: Tell me, tell me, what do you do?

J: Well, I think we've inherited some traditions, particularly in the United States, that suggest that we can separate faith from politics. You know, in some places people have tried to sort of keep that neat and distinct and have been able to, I think, to the extent that political issues didn't disrupt their daily life that much. But I think close attention to the scriptures has helped me to see that faith is always political. If politics is just about sort of how people live together, I mean, we make all these ultimate claims, you know, about who God is and who people are, based on how we were created. And it seems to me you can't really believe that stuff and not think that it matters in terms of how people live together.

H: Yeah, it's pretty central, especially the gospels.

J: But at the same time, you can completely understand why people would have a visceral reaction against politicizing, I'm using scare quotes here, "politicizing" things, right? Because, you know, of what we were talking about earlier, I mean, you know, when people say, you know, "If you believe in Jesus, you have to vote for this person," that's pretty awful.

H: Yeah.

J: And I think that reflects the tension that always exists within faith between what we believe and know to be true and look forward to at the end. However you imagine the end. When God makes all things right, I think we all believe certain things. I think most people would agree when God makes all things right, children won't be hungry. You know, when God makes all things right, wars will not needlessly take people's lives anymore, right? When God makes all things right, people will not destroy the very earth we live on in order to recreate or enjoy ourselves or whatever the case may be. So we believe that, but then there's this tension of, okay, what can you put into practice in the here and now, right? And that gets messy, whether it's in the political realm or whether it's in, you know, just your personal everyday life, right? There's all kinds of things I believe about, you know, who I will be when I am, you know, completely transformed fully into the image of God. What does Paul say? What we shall be, we have not yet seen, but, you know, we will know him when we see him face to face. That's true.

And, you know, I know enough about myself to know that there's kind of this daily reckoning with, okay, how do you live between the tension of that, you know, that and what you can actually figure out how to do today. So I think part of the political question is about this kind of practical negotiation of, okay, what can we do? And in a lot of ways, I think our imagination for that is limited by the cultures and communities we come from. So, you know, one of the things, I spend a lot of time with, you know, white, fairly well-resourced Christians in America talking about is, well, you know, if you haven't been white and fairly well-resourced in the history of this country, there are faith communities that have developed all kinds of ways of, you know, organizing themselves and advocating for change. It seems to me that, you know, if we're at a point where we recognize that something has gone wrong, we should disciple ourselves to those traditions, much as I was just saying myself, I had to learn from not only Reverend Barber, but from a whole

tradition that he had grown up in, what it could look like to practice this moral fusion politics in the South, you know? What can it look like for white folks and black folks to advocate together for change without, you know, just sort of becoming cheerleaders for a party or a candidate, but to say, "No, actually, we want to make these issues matter to whoever is in public office, to whoever is running for public office, and we're going to build a movement that sort of demands that. That's a kind of organizing. It's a tradition that exists that people like me need to learn, and it takes some time to learn it. So, we should apprentice ourselves to people who've been practicing it for some time.

B: Yeah, I'm wondering, to get super concrete, Jonathan, you know, we have lots of seminarians, of course, who listen to the podcast, lots of priests, pastors, rectors, lay leaders. Can you give them some encouragement, especially to those who know they're going to need to step up into the pulpit and preach in the next six months, and who might feel fearful about estranging one group of parishioners against another group of parishioners, maybe a, you know, a noted parishioner is poised to give \$100,000 for a roof project. I mean, these aren't hypotheticals. You know, our churches have needs, and parishioners have all sorts of pet ideologies. What encouragement do you have to a preacher who will need to get up in front of their congregation, who might be tempted to say nothing, to just sort of be nice, to avoid all the contentious issues? What's your hope for them?

J: Well, it's a scary thing to step into a pulpit and to believe, as those of us who do it do believe, that God is actually going to speak through you to the people who are there in front of you. You know, I don't take it lightly when I do it or when anyone else does. But if we attend to how God has spoken to God's people through the history that's recorded and that we know, it's pretty clear that God has challenged God's people to hear the cries of people who are suffering. And there's a lot of suffering in our world. Almost half of the United States is poor or low income today. We have good data that tells us that makes poverty the fourth leading cause of death. That's a moral issue, right? It's not one that's been promoted by the so-called values movements that we were talking about earlier. That hasn't been to their political advantage to point that out. But that's the kind of thing that the biblical prophets were concerned about, right? "You grind the poor and make women and children your prey." That's prophetic speech. And you know, the prophets who were called to preach that message, I think they probably understood that they were going to offend some people. So you have to ask yourself, "Well, why did they do it?" I think the answer has to be ultimately they did it because they loved the people that they saw destroying themselves.

That's Jeremiah, the weeping prophet who weeps over this city that could be so much more, but is unable to see its own destructive tendencies. I think pastors have to know their people well enough to know that our addiction to the lies that we've been told and that we've told ourselves are actually hurting us. And we cannot be free until we receive the truth that sets us free. And if you believe in the power of the gospel, I think you can believe that even when that word hurts, it gives life. The great Protestant theologian, Martin Luther, said, "Only the word that kills can give life," and that was his word on

preaching. Until you find where the gospel touches what needs to die in you and society until you let it touch that place, resurrection is impossible.

So in some ways, I would say to pastors that I understand the fear, I understand all of the agony that one takes with them into that pulpit. For myself, I always consider when I'm inclined to say, "Maybe I shouldn't tell this truth," do I really believe that resurrection is possible?"

B: So you describe in rather stark terms our own addiction to self-destruction. But you can't leave us there, Jonathan, in this episode. I presume also your front row seat to these issues have also been an occasion to witness some really powerful, beautiful acts of faith, acts of courage, trust. And I wonder, after years of doing really, really hard work, and in the midst of a political season that proves to be as daunting as we've ever been through, what are you seeing that you want to give gratitude for and that's ultimately fueling your hope to continue doing the work?

J: Well, thanks for asking. I'll go back to one community of people. You know, Hannah, you started by asking about *Revolution of Values*. I started that book by telling the story of a woman named Maria, who I met when we went to El Paso, Texas. The story I told was about how these folks wanted us to go with them to the river because they had organized, and this was no small work of organizing. This community of mostly women had organized to pressure the Border Patrol to actually accompany them on visits to the river so that they could go out into the river and see their family who they had no other way to see. So they would meet in the middle of the river and they said to Border Patrol, "What does the law say? Does the law say we can't meet?" And they said, "No, the law says if you're on this side, you can't go over there, and if you're on that side, you can't come over here, but that's all the law says." So they said, "Okay, watch us. We're going to go spend time with our families, and then we'll both go back to the sides we came from." And so they invited the Border Patrol to escort them to these meetings. And they wanted us to come and be part of that, which was an incredible gift just to see the strength and courage of their organizing.

But the day after we had that meeting in the river, they wanted us to see how they organized, so they invited us to their meeting. And it was in a Catholic church, a parish there in El Paso. And I'll never forget going into that fellowship hall and looking around and realizing that this incredibly powerful organizing, I think it would be fair to call it pro-family. It was all about bringing these families together across the border, and it was all about these women holding on to hope that their families could survive. And they had done it in their church. When they talked about it, they had done it strengthened by their prayers and by their faith. And in many ways, what they had invited us to see, which they were calling it at the time, "Hugs, not walls," and they were lifting it up as a alternative to the sort of, "Build the wall" slogan of that moment. In so many ways, it was the everyday practice of faith that had led them to that vision and that had sustained them. And I just think that's the kind of faith that I want people to be introduced to, because that will keep you going. It's like the old freedom songs. You never know when you're going to need them, but you better sing them every chance you get just to practice, because they can keep you alive. Amen.

H: Thank you so much for being with us. This has been such a gift. I can't wait to share it.

B: We're so thankful for your work, Jonathan.

J: Thankful for y'all. Yeah, thanks for this.

B: 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/podcast.

H: Rate and review us and follow the podcast to make sure you never miss an episode. Follow Berkeley@Yale on Instagram for quotes from the podcast and more.

B: Until next time,

H: the Lord be with you.