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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.

H: On this journey, we reflect on what matters most in life as we talk about all things spirituality, innovation, leadership, and transformation.

Hey, everyone. It's Hannah Black. Welcome to The Leaders' Way.

Today, I'll be chatting with Sarah Condon, who's a regular contributor to Mockingbird. If you don't know about Mockingbird, Mockingbird is an organization devoted to connecting the Christian faith with the realities of everyday life. A couple of Sarah's recent articles with Mockingbird are "Tragic Forgiveness" and "Happy Ash Valentine's Day." She's also one of the hosts of Mockingcast, which is a really excellent podcast. Sarah Condon is a priest in the Episcopal Church and an alumna of Berkeley Divinity School at Yale.

So it's extra special to welcome her to the Leaders Way podcast today.

Hi, Sarah. Welcome to the Leaders Way. I just wanna welcome you back to Berkeley.

Sarah: Yeah.

H: Yeah. I'm an avid Mockingcast listener, so this is super fun for me. It feels like a podcast crossover. Awesome.

S: I love it. I love it.

H: Yeah. One of the funniest things about listening to Mockingcast for me is that Simeon Zahl was my PhD supervisor. And so listening to his brother... their voices sound so similar.

S: Oh, that's funny. Yeah. Yeah. That's awesome. I like to think of myself not as a sister in that family, but like as a second cousin, you know. Mhmm. I mean, I just got to spend time with Mary and Paul Zahl, and it was so meaningful. So, yeah. They're great. Wonderful.

H: Super wonderful. Well, okay. So I said welcome back to Berkeley because you're a Berkeley alumna. And I know a lot has happened in your life since seminary. We love, on this podcast, to hear people's stories of discernment and their vocation stories. And I know you've

had twists and turns, so I wondered if we could just jump right in and hear a little bit about your vocation story.

S: Sure. Well, I was really fortunate to be raised in the Episcopal church, and I say that because in my ministry now, I encounter so many women who really struggle with feeling a call to leadership because they were raised in churches that don't support women in leadership. And I feel like that was like one of the biggest gifts my parents gave me was just--especially in Mississippi when everyone was Southern Baptist. Yeah.

H: They were really different.

S: Yeah. To have put me in that. And because of that, I feel like vocation was clear really early. When I was little and I would have to write down what I wanted to be when I grew up, I would always write "nun and housewife." It's like ... Yeah. Because I hadn't ... I knew you could have a woman priest, but we didn't have one in our church, and we were in a really small church. I hadn't seen one yet. I loved "Sister Act." Like, that's a huge part of my call. It's seriously because Whoopi Goldberg's character was, like I mean, she wasn't really a nun, but she became a part of that convent and she was fun. And it was, like, such a beautiful way to see, like, women can be in religious leader roles and also, like, really have a wonderful, full, rich life. Right? And that felt pretty remarkable to me.

So really early on, I was articulating a call. And then my senior year of high school, a teacher suggested--and it was just like so Mississippi-public-school that a teacher would suggest this-- She's like, "You're always at your church. You should do something about your church." So I wrote about women in the Episcopal priesthood.

So you had to find a mentor, and I had a mentor in this guy. He's a priest, Andy Andrews. Of course, he gave me all these books on the history of women in the Episcopal priesthood, but he also gave me, like, a copy of *Listening Hearts*. You know, he also was like, this is like what discernment looks like. So, yeah.

So then I go off to college and start the process towards the end of my senior year, and I graduated college in May and met my husband in, at the end of September. We were doing relief work together after hurricane Katrina. And that meant something, you know, if you're in the process in the Episcopal church, it's such a pain in the ass because it can, you know ... you're really at the whim of bishops and, you know, that's for good and for ill, depending on, like, what decision got made. But, you know, I called the bishop in Mississippi who has a hard time keeping priests and, you know, etcetera.

And he very gently said, look, you can be sponsored by this diocese, but you're gonna have to promise me that you and your husband will come back. And I knew what that meant. That meant that my husband was gonna be a rector, and I was gonna have 3 tiny country churches that I was running myself. Like, I knew what that meant. And so I moved my process to the diocese of New York, and that is the diocese that sponsored me for ordination and made me a deacon.

H: So Yeah. Wow. So that was like twist and turn number one.

S: Yeah. Yeah. It was it was crazy.

H: Then you went to seminary from the Diocese of New York and then what?

S: I did. I did. And, seminary was very interesting for me. At that point in time and maybe this is true still of the population, I don't know, I just remember being struck by how many people's grandparents went to college. And what I mean by that is, you know ... I was a girl that went to a state school in the deep south. My parents went to college, but they were first-generation people to go to college. We come from, like, farm people. So seminary was tough for me in a lot of ways, because culturally, you know, a lot of people are from the East Coast. A lot of the people came from higher levels of education than I had experienced. And, I found that to be truly like a real struggle. I mean, I remember being in a class once and we were talking about ancient Israel and, you know, the agrarian lifestyle, and of course, they had, like, so many children. Right? And I come from I mean, my grandmother is one of many. My other grandmother is one of many, you know. And somebody was just, like, outraged. Like, I can't believe they did all this child labor. And I was like, woah. Like, this is, you know. So it was interesting.

I had a baby in seminary, which felt new for that institution. And so that was a whole thing to navigate. And it made seminary a year longer. Again, bishops, you know, my Bishop kind of stepped in, which was a very good thing because I'm not sure how I would have managed with the academic load and a child and commuting. So that, you know, that's how I've managed to get through seminary. Only for the young. I mean, not to disparage anybody, but like, when I look back at the, you know, we had an hour and a half commute. My husband would drop me off at the train station in Rye, New York.

H: Oh, wow. No. That's great.

S: Wake up the baby at 5:45. I mean, you know ... so I, I really wanted it, clearly, but it was ... it was tough. It was really hard.

H: And now your ministry is, like, I mean, I view it as really multifaceted because you're a priest and you're a podcaster and you're a mom and you're a ... you know, there are a lot of, like, and, and, and! Has anything surprised you about that, or did you kind of see that coming?

S: Oh, I definitely did not see it coming. Before I met my husband, I was like, I'm gonna be the rector of a small church. Like ... that was, and it was gonna be in Mississippi. And I was not gonna get married, and I was gonna benevolently adopt a child at 30.

H: So this is how you achieve the dream of the nun-housewife.

S: Yes.

H: Mystery solved!

S: And none of none of that happened. None of that happened. So I don't think we ever know what God has in mind for our story. I mean, I've like, I don't think I ever meet anyone who's like, "I knew I was gonna blah blah blah blah." Like, I just feel like that's ... our God has so much more nuance. God is always the thing under the thing. And so we don't ... yeah. We

have no idea. I don't think ... you know, I was raised with very progressive parents. And, you know, my dad would have called himself a feminist, which was like the only man in Mississippi who would have done that. And I think they would have been surprised, or they were surprised, and I'm surprised at how much of the vocation of motherhood and priesthood have like become one for me. Right?

H: Wow.

S: And then all that sort of informs the other things. And it's hard to say if it's priesthood or if it's just being Christian. Right? And growing into that as a parent and as a spouse. So yeah. I don't know.

H: Tell me more about that. How does, like, priest life or Christian life show up in motherhood for you?

S: I think there's like a gentleness that didn't come naturally to me that has been a definite growing edge as a mom, and I'm not sure I would have had the capacity for it if I didn't understand God's grace and goodness. You know? I mean, I think I think it's really easy to be very hard on ourselves as moms, especially moms with, you know, jobs. Like, I travel for my work a lot and have missed major things, but to know, right, we're loved by the ultimate, like capital F, Forgiver. Right? That helps me to not project my anxiety about my kids never going to church or hating me or whatever it is that we tell ourselves when we're raising small children to kind of get the better. Mhmm. So yeah.

H: Gosh. I so I've wondered at times, like, are we talking about discernment too much? Like, how many seminarians are actually listening to this podcast? Is it mostly people who are already in ministry? But, like, the more I get to know people who are, like, already "in ministry" (in scare quotes) because, like, aren't all of us already in ministry anyway? Anyway. Anyway.

S: Totally. Yeah.

H: It does feel like a lot of us are perpetually in discernment throughout life, or, like, discernment comes in waves. You've already been ordained or decided to not become ordained or whatever. So with that in mind and and talking a little bit about, like, the subtlety of God in our lives, like ... what words of wisdom do you have for people who are in some kind of discernment or other?

S: I mean, I think you have to kind of let go of the vision of how you thought this was gonna go. Like, I think that's that's the surrender is like, you know, it's like our brothers and sisters in AA. Like, surrender is the first step. And, you know, I definitely had to do that. And for a lot of us, for me, it has to be, like, ripped from my clutched-at-the-wheel hands. Right? But, like, it still happened. It's part of the reason why a lot of the people I paid more attention to in seminary were older, because I think they had known unexpected suffering. They had known unexpected challenges, and it made them a lot a lot more like, "Well, this is how this is gonna go." You know?

H: So yeah. You know, I've been working with students this semester teaching a systematic theology section, and we've been talking a lot about suffering, which I know is something you've thought a lot about, and, sort of, like, what grief looks like as a Christian, how it plays out in your community, how it plays out in prayer, how it plays out. And it's interesting. I do think, like, we're doing it in a good way where students are... their assignment is to take their readings from the class and kind of, like, translate them into a pastoral ministry situation. And still, I think there's nothing quite like the real thing.

S: Yeah. And it's ... it's hard. You know, I remember reading years ago in the New York Times, because, you know, we love the word empathy culturally, and that we can't teach children empathy. You know, and which --you would think we could because there's all these like, "Here's how you teach kids empathy." The only way, based on psychology, that children learn empathy is to have something horrible happen in their lives and to have people take care of them. And so ... I mean... I think I almost wonder if you should make them write about more specifically about their lives. Right? Because it's like, yeah, their own suffering because it's like ... that's how you access that part of yourself that's able to sit with someone who has gotten a cancer diagnosis or whose marriage is falling apart or whose adult child doesn't speak with them. Like, that's, you know, you can ... you're not benevolent. Right? You're *in that* with them.

H: Totally. Do you wanna talk a little bit about what grief has looked like in your Christian journey?

S: Yeah. It's it's funny; we're talking about discernment. So I spoke at my friend Steve Shelby's church in Winter Park, Florida. I got to preach there for Ash Wednesday, which was ...

H: Oh, wow.

S: So powerful. And as somebody who doesn't get to preach regularly, to get to preach 3 times in one day was, like, amazing. It just ...

H: And on Ash Wednesday!

S: I know. It was amazing. And at the last service, Stu got up and went to do the announcements and he said, "We're so grateful that Sarah came. She seems to be called into going around the country and talking about grief in light of who Jesus is." And later, it was so funny. After the services, he was like, "I can't believe I said, you know, blah blah blah." You know?

And I was like, "No. No. No. No. That was very helpful." Because it was like this clear vocational voice. And you always know it's the Holy Spirit when people are like, "I don't know why I said that." You know? It's like, well, it's the Holy Spirit. That's why he said it. So, you know ... so ...

I mean ... I so I lost both parents in a car accident. It was three years ago in December. Mhmm. And obviously very sudden and really, really, really hard. Hard at every level. I mean, hard from the standpoint of ... they had essentially a 6-bedroom home that, like, suddenly I had to, like, absorb all of it because I'm the oldest girl by quite a few years. And so ...

H: Oh, same. Oh, we can have ...

S: Yeah. That's what you do. Yeah. "Are you the oldest daughter or can you ask for help?" is what I always think of. So ...and actually, we were so lucky. We had family just show up in insane, insane ways, for us. And I'm, you know, from a place where I have, like, one side of my family is super, super progressive and the other side of my family is super, super conservative. And to see them, like, show up in the middle of COVID; people brought their babies. I mean, it was just ... I have a cousin who's in the military and he knew he would not be able to get time for the funeral. And he flew in, and all he did for those few days that he was there and they were all in the house was sweep the floor and warm up plates of lasagna. Like, it was so powerful for me.

H: He did what Job's friends should have been doing. Heating up lasagna.

S: Yeah. He did. He honestly--he was the most Jewish, right?--of anyone there, because they have such better ritual for grief than we do and for how to be with those who are grieving. And he was in some ways ... like, I remember talking to my therapist who was a - was a - she's not my therapist anymore, but, because I moved. Trust me. I'd still be with her. Also, if you're listening to this, do not go to a Christian therapist, only Jewish therapists. If you're in ministry, please stay the hell away from somebody called a Christian counselor. That's not what you need, you need clarity. So anyway, I was ... I talked to her just a few days after they died. I was like, "Oh, we've gotta go to the house, and I've gotta do this, and I've gotta do that." And she said, "If you were Jewish, someone would be sitting next to you spoon feeding you."

H: Oh my gosh.

S: And it was so powerful. Like, so I feel like my cousin got the closest to that, but ... Yeah. So this hole in my life opened up that will never be filled again. And, you know, I kind of have these two outlines of people that are always with me. And some days, it feels very normal that they're gone. And then some days, it feels very much like they're right here, that they should be right here. So it's a lot to navigate in addition, right, to having children and having a ministry. And at that point, I was in my favorite job I ever had, which was as a college minister at Rice University. And the students were incredible. Like, I always look back at that. They were just incredible. So really dear. But, you know, it's a crazy thing. It's still crazy three years later.

H: Yeah. Well, yeah. It's funny you mentioned students again. Because I ... I have loved talking to our seminarians about grief, because it's been so different from talking to people like they feel like they should have answers. Yeah. I think when you're a student, something kinda magical and chaotic happens where you can just have questions. And you can kind of, like, believe in ideals in a way that ... All of a sudden when you have to be in charge of stuff, you have to kind of like put the pieces together in ways that sometimes are good and sometimes I wish we could hold a little bit more mystery and a little bit more messiness.

H: Yeah. Because with loss like this, there aren't easy answers. Like, there's, you know, they're not. I mean, it was weird for me when we moved here. I mean, weird is the wrong word, but really jarring. So we got the call ... I mean, we've only been in Nashville ... it'll be a year in

June. And we got the call to come here two weeks before the Covenant shooting. And we have a couple of people who go to my husband's church (which is my church; I don't work there, but it's our family's church) and who like, work at Covenant and who are there and who have their kids there and, you know ... I have to say, one of the women that works there is probably the best companion in grief I think I've found. Just because we talk about the complication of, like, no easy answers. Right?

H: There are a lot of bad answers.

S: Right. There's a lot of bad answers. No easy answers, and yet we know that God carries us and loves us and pulls those who die so tragically, close into his heart. And I think that's kind of the only kind of comfort that I can find.

H: Yeah.

S: I mean, people said really, really bad stuff.

H: And confidently.

S: Oh, very confidently. Yeah. Very confidently. I mean, I mean, the worst one was not religious. Although people said terrible religious things and, oh my god, the cards were so awful.

H: The cards. Who is writing these cards?

S: The cards. Well, I have to say, there are two bad things. One was religious, one wasn't. I was a woman sent me this whole note, and it had a clutching cross in it. And no offense against clutching crosses, but my god, I don't need another one. And she sent me it and had a clutching cross on it, and it said, "Remember that Jesus's father abandoned him, too."

H: (gasps) Absolutely not.

S: Dead serious. She was dead serious. So, yeah, I was like, "So we're not friends anymore. Cool. Like, that got sorted." That was, like, very easy for me. I was like, we not doing this.

H: It's a no from me.

S: It's a no. I know. And then my husband, who was so well-meaning and just wanted to get me out of the house, it was like three weeks, maybe a month later, maybe more than that. It's such a blur. But anyway, he's like I mean, I literally was like couch-ridden. I wasn't bedridden, but I was couch-ridden for six months. So anyway, he ... he's like, "We, well, I got to drop this thing off." It was at this elderly woman's house who went to our church. And honestly, I feel like we've been gone long enough I can say this. She had lost her son in an accident when he was a teenager, and she's elderly now. I'm thinking, "Okay. Well, she will have the capacity." Right?

And we get there and the first thing she says to me is, “How are we gonna get you over this?” And my husband ... my husband had to physically restrain me from this elderly woman. Like, I felt ... his hand just goes up against my chest because I was like, “Well, I know one way, you know, out in your front yard.” So, yeah.

And I ... you know, I think honestly, the best things that people can say are memories of the people, which is super Jewish. Right? Like, if you sit shiva, the only real talking you're supposed to do is, like, to talk about the person. Right? And that's always, like, people even now, people say, “Oh, I didn't wanna bring up your mom and dad or, you know, blah blah blah blah.” And, like, but they're always here with me.

H: Yeah. You're already.

S: You're just acknowledging the reality. Like, I haven't forgotten. You know what I mean? Yeah. It's ... having grief like that is like having a child. Like, they're not the obviousness of it may not be in your presence, but they're always a part of a deep, deep part and a deep, deep sense of of your day. Yeah.

H: Yeah, I haven't shared this on our podcast before, but I lost my dad to suicide when I was, like, 12 years old. Like, really, really young.

S: I'm so sorry. Yeah.

H: Which I feel like I should I should say since I'm, like, commiserating with you. ... that everything is coming from somewhere. And, you know, one of the twists and turns in my story is I ended up writing a Ph. D. about ways that we talk about salvation that are unhelpful, and that kind of emphasize and glorify violence and suffering. And I think one of the things I've had to untangle is ... it is possible that God takes tragedy and redeems it, like he does over and over in the book of Genesis.

S: Sure. Yeah. Yeah.

H: But God wasn't up there in the sky going, “You know what would be, like, a nice tasty piece of medicine, like ... suffering. Suffering!” Because it does give you a different picture of god. But I wonder if that's something you've wrestled with at all.

S: Yeah. I mean, it's a ... I think I wrestled with it a lot, especially with my kids.. And, like, are you ... are you; basically, you're asking the question of, like--what is that theological word? I'm in perimenopause. I can't remember anything. You know, where suffering why does suffering happen? Well, I can't remember the theological word, but ...

H: The theodicy situation?

S: Yes. That's the word. Yes. And I think there's a lot of mystery around it. Right? And I think we can't we can't know. I don't think that ... do I think that God is up there? I ... you know, I think in America, especially, our version of God is so based on Zeus. You know? Seriously, like, God's gonna punish me, and God did this, and God did that. As though God is, you know,

looks like the dad in Ariel, and, you know, in the Little mermaid.. And he's I mean, that's really how we treat God.

H: The one I love is, like, hammer in one hand, lollipop in the other.

S: Yes. Yes. Yeah. I love it. I mean, it's just so wrong.

H: It's so wrong.

S: And I just think we have to make peace with not knowing. And I think that's a harder thing for some people than it is for others, and I think that's okay too. You know? I mean, I remember asking why a lot. But also, I remember at some point realizing that it is what it is. Right? That this is the reality I've been given. So whenever I talk about anything positive that's come out of the fact that my parents died, and there have been positives. I've had people say to me, like, "Oh, but you, like, you didn't want them to die." And I'm, like, "Well, of course I didn't, but like ..."

H: That's not what I'm saying!

S: Yeah. It's not an option to understand. Right. Do you know what I mean? Like, it's not an option to understand. And so making peace with that as much as we can. And there are days I've made more peace with it and days I've made less. But, yeah. It's, yeah. So my mom's father died by suicide when she was two, and then her brother, when she was 8, had just been stationed in Washington state, and he saw a woman trying to jump off a bridge to kill herself. And obviously had this family history with it. And he jumped in to save her, and she actually survived and he drowned. They never found his body. And so our family is touched profoundly by suicide. And I guess I just wanna say ... First of all, do you know the Luther story about the ... Martin Luther was at his first parish and a young man had committed suicide and no one would ... do you know the story? No one would let him be buried in the churchyard? Because that is, that was the rule. Still a rule in some churches, right? You can't be buried in the churchyard. And he went and he cut his body down And he said ... you know, everyone said, "Oh, he's a suicide. He can't be, he can't be buried here." And we can debate the theology of this, but to me, it felt so beautiful.

He said, "You know, this would be like if he were out in the woods and had been murdered by robbers, only the murderer was the devil himself." There's something so pastoral. Right? Like, we're actually gonna break the rules. Because when I actually, when I talk about people being nearest the heart of God, because we have so much suicide, I think about, like ... I think about how they are the closest because they needed the most reassurance. Right? Yeah. And that brings me a lot of comfort.

H: Yeah. What do you think American Christians get wrong about grief?

S: So much. I mean, I'm not sure I've met one that does it well. It's, like, really, really hard to get right. I really think, like, totally seriously, I think Judaism would be the way that we should all be paying more attention. Right? You know, I think about conservative traditions in Christianity, and I always ... the story always stays with me. My mom had a good friend that,

you know ... like classic Mississippi Southern Baptist Church. Right? And her husband died pretty young, and she was astonished at how little the church, like, reached out. And she said, and I, this always stays with me: she said, "You know, they're always talking about the widows and the orphans. And now I am one, and no one's here." And I think that's pretty common, you know, in most churches.

I think in more in Episcopal circles, it's just not spoken about. I mean, I I know we love to think we're sort of past being, like, rigid East Coast emotionless, you know, asters. Right? But I think a lot of that comes out and and really makes itself known when there's, like, real tragedy; that people just can't cope with it. Yeah.

H: It's almost like there's a lack of tools in the toolbox, or we need, like I don't know. Like, maintaining non-awkwardness and dignity is more important than, like ... whatever it is. Whatever it is.

S: It's gonna be really awkward. Like, jump right in. You know? Like I mean, I think that's the thing-- it is gonna be awkward. You're not gonna know if you did the right thing, but at least you did something. And, you know, when you talk about saying the right thing ... and the other thing in Judaism, you're not--you know, they don't talk about where the person goes. Now that's for a whole host of religious reasons. But that is ... you know that for me was one of the hardest things that I don't know if that was true for you. But, you know, it was like when people are like, "Oh, but your parents are in heaven." I'm like, "But they were just here. What do you mean?"

H: Well, it was super awkward with my dad because the theologies about ...

S: ... it's terrible. No. Where did you grow up?

H: I grew up in a Southern California megachurch. I actually had split custody between 2 non-denom mega churches.

S: Wow.

H: I don't know if I get a special award for that. But, yeah, people did not know what to think. Yeah. It was also a lot of former Roman Catholics who had become, like, born again Christian...

S: Oh, fascinating.

H: So truly, people didn't know what to think. And I think about this too, when we talk about, like, having hot-button-issue conversations where ... there's a time and a place for theologizing, and I'm literally a theologian, so literally, I believe that we must have solid theology. But that time and place are different from the time and a place where we need a safe space, whether it's, like, for the LGBTQIA+ community or people who are grieving or whatever. Like, the theology and the safe place do need to talk to each other, but they're different things.

S: Like Yeah.

H: Right after somebody's parent dies is not the time where you're like, "Well, according to this and this theologian," or "Oh, have you thought about this bible verse?" Unless it's a ... you know, psalm of lament. Bring that. But ...

S: Right. I mean, I think the only thing I would say is, like, good theology makes us pastoral. And so if you're carrying that into the room, you will ... you will be able to say, this is the right time, this isn't the right time, but also to say "This is how I'm gonna serve this person out of what I believe to be true." I love ... there's a t-shirt that came out several years ago that said "Bad theology kills." Oh, yes. And, you know, I love that t shirt and it's very true. But, I think good theology can be super pastoral without ... you know, it's that subtlety of God thing, without being like, "Here's what .. you know, here's you're $a+b=c$. You know?"

H: Yes. Yes. Yes. Well, and ... back to this assignment I've been doing with these seminarians; a lot of what I'm seeing is that the theology they're bringing into, like, this case study, this is for Willie Jennings' systematics class. So ... credit to him for the assignment, but I get to grade them. And truly, it's a "get-to" because I'm like, "Wow, I want all these people to be my priest." But yeah. Bringing in, like ... theologies of prayer; theologies of God's love and wanting to be connected to us; theology of, like, holding the mystery and not being able to give answers for, like, why so and so just had a cancer diagnosis or how is it ... You know? So that kind of, like, apophatic, "I actually ... there's a lot I don't know" is part of our theology that we bring to these situations of grief and confusion and life.

S: And I think just, like, bringing ourselves. I think that's a thing. Like, we kind of have this Christian like, prescription of how we think we're supposed to be in those situations. And it's ... you're not being yourself. Like, I remember at our last parish, we had this incredible sweet family. They had a little girl. Mom was pregnant with little boy and literally, he just stopped moving at like 39 weeks. And so she had to give birth and she had to do all that stuff. And I was a hospital chaplain at the time. And so my husband did visit, but he was like, "You should go first. Like, you're gonna be really good in this space.: And her parents were like, really conservative Christians. And I was like, "Oh ..." And I walked in and I just saw the look on her face. And the first thing I said in front of her mother and God and everybody was, "This fucking sucks." And it was, like, the release ... that was totally, I mean, say what you want to about what the Holy Spirit has us ... come out of our mouths, but that felt like, that really felt like a thing that was, "This is what needs to be said in this room." Like, we need to stop kind of acting like something god-awful hasn't taken place. You know? For her sanity if for nothing else. So yeah.

H: Well and it seems like that's how God speaks through people in so much of the bible, especially when I think about the prophets. Yeah. He's saying to his people, like, "Y'all are off your rockers. You're being terrible. Terrible things are happening and even worse things are coming." And I think this kind of, like ... well, Brandon and I joke a lot on this podcast about how we're basically two golden retrievers. But, also, like ... part of that is I think the Jesus I was led to imagine growing up was basically a golden retriever. And, actually, that's not totally it. You know? Like, Jesus is quick to give a tough word to people. Jesus is quick to call it like he sees it. And part of that is that this world we live in, because we're so terrible, is terrible. A lot of

... there's a lot of goodness to be had. It's created to be good. It's going to be good, but also, like ... this fucking sucks.

S: Yeah. Yeah. And, like, how can we hold that? As Christians, how can we hold that and also beauty in the same place? You know? And I think that's the, that's kind of the space that is most interesting to me when it comes to grieving. Like how can both those things be true at the same time? And literally how can you not have 1 without the other on some level? You know? Yeah.

H: It definitely feels to me like one sense that we've lost as the church is that God is beauty. We talk about God being love. We talk about God being truth. I think we're, like, extra-obsessed with that, actually. Our facts about God are right.

S: And, I'm always like, what does that *mean*, that God is love? So yeah.

H: I know. I ... yeah. I've been chatting a lot with one of our students in particular who also grew up in more of a conservative theological environment who put it so well to me. She was like, "I hadn't considered that maybe the cross wasn't God's idea." Because they were doing all of these readings about how, really, it was, like, human sin that put Jesus on the cross and the powers of empire and, you know, just all these things. Like, you could list the litany of sins that resulted in Jesus on the cross. And I don't think I'm here today to give answers, but I think I am here today to be, like, "That's a really good question. Sure. Yeah.

S: It's a good time to ask those questions. It is. I love this idea of God as beauty, because 1 thing I think about a lot, especially since I've lost my mom, is ... I'm actually looking at it right now. I have a closet full of her clothes. And she ... my grandmother was, like, a hairdresser, and so very, like, vain and beautiful, and loved, you know, makeup and clothes. And my mother is very similar, and I'm very similar. And now I'm raising his daughter who's very similar. And I think about how that gets so belittled culturally, especially because it is like a practice of women.

H: Oh my goodness.

S: But, you know, and not exclusively, but it tends to be rooted in in female culture. And, like, how for me, that is very, like, *of* God. Like, being able to dress up and put on makeup and feel beautiful. And ... that those are the things that make me feel beautiful. They're not the things that make everybody feel beautiful. But, like ... you know, I can get rid of all my mom's books. It's hard for me to get rid of her clothes. You know?

H: Yes. Well, it was it was Dostoevsky who said ... or was it Tolstoy? Ruh roh. One of them said, "Beauty will save the world." And I, you know, they weren't talking about like Sephora, but ...

S: Right. But like also what, I mean, it's also like, what a beautifully affirming place! Like, I don't know. I just feel like there's a lot of holiness in those spaces that we really kinda discount. And I think a lot of that is because it's connected to the feminine. But anyway ...

H: Yeah. Yeah. Holy cow. Well, I wanna make sure I ask you a question that we love to ask people at the end of the episodes. I don't know how much of these you've listened to, so maybe ... maybe this is a surprise, maybe it's not. But we love to ask people what's giving them hope. As you wanna say, I feel like I've been accused of being a little bit, like, glib or blase, but this is a question that's coming from a deep place that acknowledges lots of pain. Yeah. What's giving you hope?

S: So when I do these, like, speaking gigs that I do, one thing that's changed ... because I did them before mom and dad died. One thing that has changed dramatically since they died is that I'm always wondering why I'm actually there. Because I don't think I'm actually there to give the talk. I never think that anymore. Like, the talk is fine. The preaching's great. What am I there for?

H: In like a Holy Spirit way?

S: Yeah. And so I did this podcast and then preached at Calvary in Memphis, which is a great church, for their Lenten series. And I just did ... I had just done the podcast. I hadn't even preached yet. And, you know, we're talking about grief. This priest and I are talking about grief. And this woman raised her hand, she's about my age, and she said, "You know, my husband died 18 months ago, and, you know, it's been really hard ..." and it was a nice connection point. But then after it was over with and nursery and childcare had let out, she brought me her nine-year-old daughter, and she said, "I told her what you were talking about and she wants to talk to you." And I got to hear her tell me about her dad, and tell me what she missed about him. And then, because she's nine years old, she wanted to show me how she can put her leg behind her head, which I loved, you know. And it was so powerful. And then the next morning, I was about to preach and this woman came up to me and she said, "I saw your talk last night. I don't come to a lot of stuff in person. I wanted to come this morning." She said, "My dad died when I was five. And I was like, "Do you know this other family I met last night? Do you know them? Because she needs you. Like, you need her. Like, you need to know each other."

And I think if I ask myself what gives me hope, it's like moments like that, where I'm like, "Oh, this is actually why I'm here. Like, you know, this is actually these connection points and people being able to talk about their grief enough that then they connect over it." Like, you know, I mean, I had a guy who was at the event and I'm gonna talk to later this week, but he was a work colleague who just lost both parents in an accident. And there were so ... well, there aren't so many people because there's not so many people this has happened to, but there are a few people who this has happened to who, like, had those phone conversations with me, like, crying so hard I was dry heaving. Right? It's just like, it's this beautiful gift we've been given to, like, share our sadness with each other. Mhmm. And I think that's where my hope is.

H: Yeah. I don't know if you're related to this, but I have felt like it's in the moments of life that I feel like everything I know is kind of, like, blown up inside my head. I'm emotionally raw. I do not have answers. Those are the times that the Holy Spirit brings people to me saying, like, "Here are my problems. I need pastoral guidance." And I'm like, what? Why me? This is not the season. There's something about that.

S: Right. Right. Yeah. I think, I think God in a lot of ways, God is not interested in us giving each other answers so much as God is interested in us sharing suffering with each other.

H: Well, and it's like the seasons that I have no b.s. to give like at all. And even like, anything ... anything that I thought I could say is gone. Yeah. There's some real wisdom in that, maybe. I don't know. It continues to be a mystery to me that those seem to be my most, like, intense pastoral care seasons are like my lowest seasons.

S: Right. That's wild. Well, but like, God uses the broken for good. Like, we didn't get a mighty king. We got, you know, a humble carpenter. So Yeah. It makes sense.

H: We sure did. I also I mean, before we ... I realize I've been, like, trying to end this conversation ... It's not happening. Yes. I'm having too much fun. I feel like you are so aware or, like ... you try to pay attention to the Holy Spirit in a way that I'm more familiar with in the evangelical church than I am in the Episcopal church. I wonder if you have any ... any words about that.

S: Yeah. That's kind of always been really present to me. I don't know if that's because the Episcopal Church I was raised in was all former Southern Baptists? But even the priest, the Sunday school teacher, my parents ... And so I don't know. I know that definitely affects my preaching for good, truly. But, you know, I have a grandmother that always talked about God's presence to us. And so for me, I'm always wondering like--especially when things go wrong, I'm always like, "What is God doing?" You know? And also, like... I mean, you can cut this story, but, like, this always comes to mind. Airports are, like, the craziest for me with the Holy Spirit. Like, every time I fly, I'm like ... "Well, what's about to happen."

H: It's like as much as a preaching engagement. Like, "He's here!"

S: 100%. Like, I'm just like, "who!" But, like, couple years ago, I was going to do a preaching engagement, and I saw this couple in the airport, and they were elderly. And I was like, dude, they are a mess. Like, she's in a wheelchair. He's pushing her. I was like, they have terrible children. Like, why are they here? Like, they're he ... he's way too old. She looks feeble. Like, oh my gosh. And I'd done my talk, because I remember I had bought all these, like, magazines about California wine country or something, and was gonna order a glass of wine on the plane. You know, like, I was gonna have the full experience on the way home. And I get in my seat, and it's next to them. And it's just the three of us. Right? And we're and I'm just like, cool. Cool. And it's much more than she's feeble. It turns out she's had this horrible stroke. She's not verbal anymore. Right? Like, she smelled like ... that. I mean, it was like a whole thing. And he looked at me at some point and he said, "I really have to go to the bathroom. Can you watch her?" And I said, "Yeah. Yep. I ... Yep. Yep." Because this is what God's doing. Like, again, I always think, what is God ... this is what God's doing. Like, I was an asshole earlier and this is what God's doing. You know? And it's not ... maybe *because* I was an asshole, but it's so interesting that the people that I was judging are now put into my care. Right? Yeah.

H: It's just a little bit of a check.

S: So then she lays down in my lap. She, like, falls over onto my lap. So I have my neck pillow, which I would like to use. And I'm like ... she needs a pillow, so I'll prop it under her. And then her husband comes back, and he's like slightly horrified and also slightly relieved. I can see in his face. He's like, "I can move her if you want." And I was like, "No. She's clearly comfortable. We're not moving her." So then he goes to sleep for the rest of the trip. And, like, it was just so clear to me that that was the Holy Spirit. Just like ... "You need to be in this place with these people. They need you. You need them." You know? And I ... So I don't know. Stuff like that happens. And I think stuff like that happens to everyone and I don't ... It reminds me of, like, Nadia Boles Weber when she got interviewed on Fresh Air. She said, and this is so pastoral to me, she said, "You know, some people have the gift of faith. They just automatically have faith. Not everyone has that," which is, like, such a relief. Right? Because it's, like, some people really struggle with faith and to say everyone has to have x amount of faith is, like, just gonna make people crazy. And I think that, like, the Holy Spirit has just always been a huge part of, like, my life. And I I don't have an explanation for why, but I'm grateful for it.

H: I mean, I think if we get anything out of this chat, it's that we need to go ahead and pay attention to the Holy Spirit. Talk about the Holy Spirit. And enter each other's grief. Like, I think this is a bit of a call to get your hands dirty.

S: Yeah. And also, like, I would say there's a lot of things we don't agree with. Well, a few very clear ones with our evangelical and more conservative brothers and sisters. But I would say there's a lot that we share in common with them. Yeah. And if that statement makes you bristle, then let me reframe it: Take all the good stuff and dump the horse shit. You know? I mean, if that, if that is a more helpful way to think about it. But there, you know, there's real theology happening that is beautiful, you know, there's real work that's happening that's beautiful and, you know, how can we learn from that and bring that into our own tradition and our own sort of piety? So

H: Yeah. I do think there's a lot to learn from, especially by way of just, like, not being afraid to not be bored. And fun. You started out with talking about fun, and I think that's such a, such a big thing. Like, youth ministry when I was the youth was the best thing in the world.

S: Yeah. Totally.

H: It's not a bad thing. Totally. So I've been having a lot of conversations about, like, how to have talks across the divide in 2024 and an election year. And the way that I hear it talked about in ... kind of the circles that I'm now a part of really dehumanize evangelicals themselves, like individual people. And the way that I would hear evangelicals when I was in evangelical circles talk about "these crazy liberals." As if they're not even talking about people. But I think, like, one thing that I would want to say to listeners who probably have friends and family who vote all kinds of ways, is that, like, our evangelical brothers and sisters are also just trying to follow Christ. They're not like malicious masterminds or anything like that. And vice versa. Like, many of us are just out here doing our best, trying to follow the Lord.

S: Totally. That has been, like, a huge blessing of the ministry I get to do is, like, I get called into spaces. And this has been truly in, like, before mom and dad died, that are

evangelical, that don't ordain women, that aren't LGBTQ affirming. And, you know, the beautiful thing about that is I can go into those spaces and I can be myself, and also I can talk about one of my gay friends. Right? Like, it's a beautiful entry point, and talk about the light and the goodness of Jesus. That isn't like, there's no vitrol there. Like, they wanna hear it. And also if you make jokes, people listen. Right? Like, it's ... there's something like, there's a beautiful exchange there. And it's like, I think if we can agree on God's grace ...

H: Yes.

S: ... and goodness, then, like, we can have a conversation. One of them started a thing after I spoke called "Womenary," which is my favorite thing. And it was so the women, it was so the women could learn. Hey. I'll leave you with that.

H: I love it. Wow. Okay. Oh, "Womenary." Well, we live in hope. We also live in grief and the presence of the Holy Spirit. So thank you so much for coming on the Leaders Way podcast and chatting with me.

S: Thanks, Hannah. Thanks. This is awesome.

H: It was.

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H: Rate and review us and follow the podcast to make sure you never miss an episode. Follow [Berkeley@Yale](https://www.instagram.com/Berkeley@Yale) on Instagram for quotes from the podcast and more.

B: Until next time ...

H: The Lord be with you.