Leaders Way Podcast Transcript
Episode 29: Race and the Christian Imagination with Willie Jennings

Willie Jennings: I have this segment in this poem where I talk about, that some people come to divinity school, they come to seminary, and their goal is to kill God. You know, they come, and the God that's been presented to them needs to die. And I always tell them, you know, "Yes. Welcome."

"We want you to kill God."

"Hate to tell you this. Somebody beat you to it. But guess what? This real one rose from the dead, and I believe that this real one probably is different from the one that you wanna kill."

When I first started teaching, I used to think, "Oh my god. This is a crisis!" But now I realize, if you hate God enough to wanna come and kill God, maybe it's not hate that we're talking about. Maybe it's actually love that's brought you here, masquerading as hate.

B: Hi. I'm Brandon Nappi.

H: Hi. I'm Hannah Black.

B: And we're your hosts on The Leaders 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.

B: Hey, Hannah.

H: Hey, Brandon. How's it going?

B: It is going very well. I am feeling particularly celebratory. Jubilant.

H: Jubilant.

B: I would say convivial. Wow. Because you have celebrated a momentous birthday.

H: I have.

B: Happy birthday. I don't know if you're disclosing.

H: That's the thing. It is an era because now I'm 30. Goodbye twenties. Heller thirties. It's like adulthood 2.0.

B: All the partying, all the clubbing. It's all in your past.

H: You just know me so well. It's good to be seen and known like that. Right.

B: What was it really? It was Cambridge, Gregory of Nyssa, Greek Mhmm. Mhmm. Transitioned from one denomination to another. You can comment or not …

H: Yeah. Lots of reading, lots of traveling. So I guess, like, in in some dream fantasy world, that is living the dream.

B: You're adult-- you've successfully adulted. Yeah.

H: For a whole decade now depending on how you count it.

B: Did you do something special?

H: Yeah. I did several special things. I well, I promised you I would tell you what I ate for dinner on my birthday, but I'm looking through my camera reel or, like, my phone photos. And the first thing that I ate on my birthday was something called an affogato smoothie from the Human Bean, which is a vanilla smoothie that they then, like, pour a shot of espresso over. Incredible. Incredible.

B: Where is the Human Bean?

H: The Human Bean is a national chain that my friend, Katherine, works for. Shout out, Catherine. And they're based in Oregon, so they're kind of, like, slowly making it to the East Coast. There's one in Jersey. I don't know if there's one closer to us, but, it's fabulous. So we had that. We went on a hike. And for dinner, we went to an Italian restaurant where we could get cheese wheel pasta, where they pull out on a cart the big wheel of Parmesan. They, like, melt it with, you know, the little … what's the chef fire called? Torch. A torch.

B: Oh--Yes. I've seen this.

H: And then they stir the homemade pasta in, and then just, like, slap it on your plate. Wow. Delicious. And then a couple days after that, we went, like, tubing down the Shenandoah River, which was very fun.

B: Wow. Okay. Remind me at some future episode to tell you about how we lost our six year old daughter on a river while tubing.

H: Oh, no. Oh, well, we didn't bring our dog. That's the closest thing we have to a daughter, but it did say online that for 2024, they had special dog tubes. And we were like, that's not gonna end well. Might I refer to our previous episode where I talked about canoeing with Nelly. But the big Nellly news on my birthday is she actually became an official National Park Service BARK Ranger, and she has a tag to prove it. So that was maybe the best birthday present possible.

B: Congratulations. That was for you. Wow. Maybe you can educate me and our listeners about the role of a BARK ranger.

H: I'd like to read you the acronym. BARK stands for B, Bag your pet's waste. A, Always leash your pet, R, Respect wildlife, and K, Know where you can go, BARK ranger. So if you go to some National Park Service places, whether they're national parks or we went to Wolf Trap National Park for the Performing Arts or, like, sometimes a national park historic site will have it. Sometimes, if it's a dog-friendly place, you can ask and they'll give you a Bark Ranger tag if you have, like, done the Bark Ranger things.

B: Wow. I'm impressed.

H: I know. So now I don't know if our listeners know, Nellie officially has some Yale credentials after going to the Canine Cognition Center. She has like a diploma from Yale signed by Laurie Santos, and now she also is a BARK ranger. So her career is blossoming.

B: Wow. So fancy.

H: Speaking of blossoms, I want a garden update from the Nappi household.

B: Sizzling transition alert. I mean, you handing that off.

H: Thank you. It might be a spiritual gift. I don't know. It might be.

B: Yeah. It certainly is, I think. The garden is sort of in its August fullness. And here's here's sort of the spiritual training that the garden brings is that, you know, if I'm really being honest, I'm a bit of a control freak. I'm a planner.

H: I don't know what that's like.

B: I'm kinda rigid. Right? And so at its worst, gardening becomes a way for me to control creation. Of course, it's an illusion for, you know, nothing more than a moment to think that you can in fact control creation, because there's a kind of wildness going on right now in my garden. We've gotten lots of rain. Maybe we're sort of on the edge of too much rain, but flowers are bursting and things are growing beyond their allotted space. And so I'm reminded that I can just enjoy the fullness, that it's not about control, it's not about … sort of managing my own rigid expectations of things, and really just enjoying--enjoying the fullness. And I garden very much in a kind of English cottage garden style, which is wild and crazy and doesn't have sort of strict boundary lines and angles, and so it's a wonderful time to receive spiritual direction from my garden itself. And we've got hydrangea blooming like mad, it's been a wonderful year for hydrangea. We have, little mini sunflowers that are doing their thing. We have tomatoes, San Marzano tomatoes that are beginning to ripen.

H: Wow.

B: Beautiful flowering onions that are great. And so my sweet autumn clematis, which is an autumn flowering clematis, is just taking over the universe. So anyway, it's going really, really well. The climate is strange though. It's changing. We have five more days of rain

predicted this week. So I'm just sort of hopeful that I can be as flexible in my life as my plants seem to be with the changes in the climate.

H: This is reminding me of a poem actually, And I'll say, I didn't plan this ahead of time. But do you know the poem, “The Peace of Wild Things” by Wendell Berry?

B: I do. And I'm such a big Wendell Berry fan. Oh.

H: But okay. I feel like now we have to read it for the listeners.

B: We can’t not.

H: Okay. Are you ready?

B: If you don’t know Wendell Berry, like, the Poet Farmer, has been to Yale a number of times, won lots of … wrote Many books of poetry. Give us some Wendell.

H: Okay.
When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound, in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be. I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things, who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water, and I feel above me the day blind stars waiting with their light.

For a time, I rest in the grace of the world and am free.

B: Oh.

H: I feel like we needed that. That was a little gift.

B: Oh, thank you, thank you.

H: Thank you. It's also so, if I may say, the Leaders Way-coded with the anti-despair message.

B: Right? Wildness, hope. The hope grounded in, like, wide eyed willingness to wrestle courageously with the the real challenges of the world.

H: That's true. I feel like, learning from nature is like that anyway because when you sort of draw a picture of nature, it's usually, like, innocent beauty. But when you watch a nature documentary or you kind of, like, encounter nature in the wild, sometimes it's a little bit grisly. We just got a postcard from my nephew at camp that was like, I found a dead mouse in the lake. And nature's like that sometimes.

B: I mean, this is the thing, and this is what I was not prepared for when I became a gardener. It's sort of a priestly role. You have to preside over beauty and sacred things and death,

which is also a sacred thing. Right? All these things are connected. The beauty, the death, the letting go, the hope, the trust; it's all connected, which I feel like … seeing connection is the primary work of a systematic theologian.

H: Oh, here it comes. Brandon with the transition.

B: I'm not a systematic theologian. Maybe … maybe I aspire to be one in some future lifetime, but you are.

H: I am. I am. And, look, as a systematic theologian, it's always a good day for me when we have a fellow systematic theologian on the podcast. So let me tell you about our guest for the day, Willie Jennings, and then we can kind of, pontificate about systematic theology if we wish. But this is really fabulous that we get to have Willie Jennings on the podcast. He's a very famous systematic theologian, and he's somebody I was teaching alongside of last semester. So this is really fun and special on many fronts. Willie Jennings is the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Systematic Theology and Africana Studies at Yale Divinity School. His books, including *After Whiteness* in *Education and Belonging* and *The Christian Imagination, Theology and the Origins of Race*, have won several prestigious awards, and he is in high demand as a speaker and lecturer.

Professor Jennings teaches Christian theology, race theory, decolonial studies, and environmental studies, and he's an ordained Baptist minister. So he's one of our beloved professors here at Yale Divinity School, and we're super excited to have him on the podcast today. Now I think, and Brandon, this is something we've talked about; sometimes when people think of systematic theology, it feels like, "Well, is that isn't that kind of divorced from reality? Isn't that, like, pie in the sky thinking, like, brain math about God that has nothing to do with ministry or leadership?"

No! Because … Look, I don't wanna be led by somebody who doesn't have a strong understanding of life, the world, God, me, the environment, everything, and how it all fits together, because that person's not gonna have a lot of wisdom to share. And a lot of my research actually has had to do with the way our theology impacts our ministry and our understanding of our relationships to God and each other. It's all connected, and truly, bad theology is dangerous. So it's really good for anybody in a leadership position, whether they are a priest or a, you know, volunteer of some kind or somebody who takes initiative to help those in their lives in kind of an unofficial leadership capacity. We should really have good clear ideas of who we are, who God is, how to connect with God, how to connect with each other, and my personal favorite, what salvation means and how that happens. Because if we talk about these things incorrectly, it could be really harmful. And on the converse, if we talk about these things truthfully, like a beautiful garden, these ideas can plant seeds that flourish in our lives in terms of spirituality.

B: It's so fun to see how animated and excited you get as you talk about the systematic theology. That's really … that's cool.

H: Right? I'm pushing through the cold to do big hand motions here.

B: One of the things that really touches me about Willie Jennings is that he's often in Marquand Chapel. This is, the beautiful chapel here at the heart of Yale Divinity School where

we pray each day, Monday through Friday, anyway. And so, you know, not only is he a sought-after teacher, he's praying alongside students and faculty and staff.

He's a sought after mentor and spiritual guide. So you know that this idea of integration isn't just a conceptual or academic exercise. It's really like a full-life embodiment.

H: No. Well, in fact, our class was scheduled for right before chapel in the hopes that people would go straight from the lecture section to worshiping together. As a pedagogical choice.

B: Oh, I'm so excited for this conversation.

H: Mhmm. Yeah. Enjoy.

Welcome, professor Willie Jennings, to the Leaders Way podcast. You have so many wide ranging expertises. I'd imagine many of our listeners are familiar with you and your work. One place I'd like to start is at the intersection of race, theology, and the imagination. Could you kind of paint us a picture of how these things fit together?

W: Well, thank you, first of all, for inviting me on to the podcast. I'm so glad to be here with you. So, you know, race, theology, and the imagination, these things are deeply interwoven and, unfortunately, interwoven in pretty sad ways. But as I say, there is hope at the end of the tunnel, but we have to enter into the tunnel first.

What's crucial, I think, for your listeners to know, or some of them might just be already familiar with some of these matters, is that in many ways, race and racial vision is a work of the imagination. It's a work of a distorted imagination. And, unfortunately, it is a distorted imagination born out of the womb of Christianity, and specifically Christian theology, Christian thought, that taught us to read people as enclosed in their bodies and as raced beings. Sometimes people use the term culture when in point of fact, what they mean by culture is just standing in as just a stand in for “race.” And so race has become, for a lot of people, an aspect of creation itself. They believe in their heart of hearts (as we say in the evangelical context) … they believe that God created races. And that is a fundamental building block of a lot of very, very bad and harmful theology, political theology, ethics, hermeneutics; that fundamental idea that difference, the human's many ways of being different, the difference that God formed first was racial difference.

And so for so many people, that imaginative reality or should I say that imagination has become reality such that, for so many people, there is already a sense of belonging and connection that is based on race, that's based on the visual markers of racial difference. And why this is so tragic is that that sense of belonging is a direct theft from Christianity. It's a direct theft from Christian visions of belonging. For the Christian, what we're supposed to do is to walk in a room full of other Christians and automatically say, these are our siblings. This is my family. These are my people. And what the history of racial formation taught us is to do that in relationship to racial difference. To the extent that our imaginations understand racial difference to be more decisive, more crucial, more compelling than Christian difference.

That is to say, we might understand ourselves as Christians, but if you press people really hard, especially press them around their politics, press them around their economics, press

them around the way they live, press them around the way their class distinctions actually function, the deeper reality of belonging, that so many imagine comes back to race.

B: So much of teaching theology, I imagine, is a process of naming the distortion of imagination, naming this theft, but then also cultivating a renewed, a more expansive imagination. And I wonder, Professor Jennings, how do you do that? How do you dismantle one kind of imagination to make way for something that's far bigger and more capacious among your students?

W: That's a great question. And it has to do primarily with, first of all, facing the fact that our imaginations have been distorted. And for so many Christians, that's new news.

B: Right.

W: That's new news. But the other new news that so many Christians have yet to hear is the story of what New Jerusalem scholars used to call, decades ago, "gentile inclusion." The story of how we enter the story of another people. That is where the beginning of the renewal, or should I say the *conversion*, the *salvation* of the imagination begins; that God draws us into the life of another people, Israel, biblical Israel, and draws biblical Israel into the life of those gentiles as a way to open up new possibilities of imagining life together. That's the thing that most Christians never got the memo on. They never got the memo on the fact that when gentiles decided that they wanted something from this this rabbi they heard about, this rabbi from Nazareth, that they had to come incognito among his people. And guess what? *Act like* one of his people in order to get from him what they wanted.

So they had to in a sense, enter their stories; take on their mouths, the language of these people, and enter the way of thinking of these people. In fact, enter many ways the way of life of these people in order to touch this one who was a part of them. And what happens in the book of Acts is that that entering in is rewarded in a sense by the spirit falling on gentiles as much as the spirit fell on Jewish believers. And what was also so crucial is for these Jewish believers in Jesus to find out that God loved these Gentiles with the same intensity and same care and concern that God loved these people, God's own people.

And in fact, God was now trying to form one out of two. That … most Christians have never gotten a memo on that story. They've never gotten a memo of what it means to enter another people and to have our lives shaped inside the ongoing work of entering in, being a part, sharing deeply in the hopes and dreams, pain and suffering, and the aspirations of another people; but bringing their own pain and suffering and aspirations, and together, forming something new.

I love that text in Acts 11 where, you know, in Acts 10, Peter had gone to be with the gentiles and the spirit had fallen. And what's great about Acts 11 is that he comes back to his own people. And in the text, it tells us they are furious with him. Why are they furious? Because he ate with Gentiles. And with all the significance of community, of life together, that eating involves, and he ate with Gentiles. And Peter, being the great biblical hero that he is, what did he say right away? "I don't wanna do that. God made me." No thunderous defense of the Gentiles. He said, "No. I don't wanna do any of that, but God made me." And then Peter tells these disciples, these Jewish disciples of Jesus, what God had done. And my favorite verse in that chapter is the verse which says, "And they were silent." They didn't know what to say because

the silence meant that something new was now on the table that they had not imagined, that they were now obligated for the rest of their life with God to imagine.

That's what we have to remind people of, that god wants us to imagine a multitude living and loving together, and that is one of the most difficult things for Christians to do.

H: And now a word from The Living Church. What does it mean to be human? How do we live fully as creatures loved, limited, and liberated by God? If you're a leader, teacher, or preacher in the Episcopal or Anglican tradition, we'd love to invite you to the Human Pilgrimage, a Living Church conference in Oklahoma City, September 26th-28th, 2024. This conference will focus on how to be human faithfully from birth to death, how we live well and take care of one another, and how we can answer the Great Commission in light of these realities. Speakers include Amy Peeler, Katherine Sonderegger, and other top pastoral thinkers. The conference will also, we hope, equip theology students, clergy, and lay leaders to address contemporary, ethical, and pastoral concerns related to living, loving, and dying well. Come and join new friendships, good food, and ministry-forming conversations.

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H: When I think about the way I was taught to pray and imagine my relationship with God, it was very much me and God, and very kind of disembodied. So the idea of being part of a community and being humbly part of a community that interacts with other communities, just none of that was at the forefront of the imagination.

W: For most of us, I think that's the case. For most of us. We were not given any, guidance in the truth that God actually God actually wanted to redeem the creation.

H: Right. Right. Right. And it's like, me and my heart are important, but that's not the beginning and the end of the story. I wonder if we can talk a little bit more about Israel while we're here and while we're talking about gentiles being invited into the story of Israel because there are bad ways to imagine that. And I know you gave a talk at Yale recently on Christian Zionism. So firstly, could you explain what that is for our listeners who may not know?

W: Absolutely.

H: But then why does Christian Zionism exist? What's the deal?

W: Yeah. Yeah. So Christian Zionism is the idea that God has made a fundamental promise to Jewish people to have, own, and rule over their own homeland and that every nation that supports Israel's endeavor to do that will be blessed by God. And every nation that does not support Israel's nationalist claim to its territory will be cursed by God. Because Israel having that territory, the nation-state of Israel having that territory, is critical to the plan of God for the future. And that fundamental idea is what drives Christian Zionism--to be distinguished from Jewish Zionism only to the extent that it's less concerned about Jewish people as *people* and more concerned about the place they play, the trigger they are to God's eternal plan. And inside of that, there are a number of really bad theological ideas. Yes. It's like opening up a car engine

and the mechanic saying, “It's your brakes. It's your battery. It's your starter. And by the way, it is your engine too.”

H: Right. Right.

W: So it's a number of really bad, really bad things. But let's start with the most important thing that that creates it, and that's a problem. And that is the idea, and many of your listeners might know this, of what's called supersessionism. Supersessionism is the idea that God has replaced Israel with the church, with Christians, as the people of God. That we Christians are the people of God. And so that means that the Bible, both the Hebrew Bible, what we would call the older testament or the Old Testament as it still gets called, that that is actually ours first and theirs second. That all the promises, all the plans, all the hopes of God really are aimed at us as Christians. Because to be aimed at us as Christians is an important fact in this way of thinking to be aimed at the whole world. And so Israel, in a sense, was simply-- like a rocket has those earlier stages that fall away so that the rocket can go where it wants to go. Israel was an earlier stage. Israel was a doorstop. Israel, whatever language you wanna use, they were the penultimate to the ultimate. So supersessionism is the belief that the church, the Christians, are the people of God.

But now here's the thing about it: that belief entered the ground, it entered the dirt inside the idea of nations and peoples as nations. And so from the fifteenth century forward, that idea of election found its home among the Portuguese, found its home among the Spanish, found its home among the Dutch, found its home among the British. It found its home in multiple peoples, within the context first of the Catholic church, but then in the context of Protestantism, it found its home. And so election, Israel's election, became the election of every nation that serves the Christian God. Now that idea of supersessionism is so important because it then authorizes Christians to think on behalf of God for the sake of the world-- what's best for the world. God has bequeathed to us the responsibility of bringing the whole world to maturity, of bringing the whole world to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

H: It's almost a twisting of the idea of our dominion.

W: Absolutely. But it starts off … and you can see there's a kind of vision of humility in that. God has granted us this responsibility in the providential care of God. God has led the Christian nations to the uncivilized peoples in order to bring them to the truth of the saving knowledge of Jesus, and has done so as nations.

So what that then means is that the Christian, as the one--these Christian nations and their leaders--as those tasked by God to bring the world to maturity, are always looking for the signs of God: what God wants us to do. And one crucial sign was the way in which God will now turn God's attention back to the people of Israel who had rejected the salvation, and God would bring them to salvation. How would God do that? Well, God will save them just as how, just as God has saved all the gentile nations, raised up all the gentile nations. Ergo, God would grant Israel, the Jewish people, their own nation-state as a precursor, as a condition for bringing them, as well, into the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Now what that then meant was that in a strange way, from the seventeenth century forward, you find Christians arguing *against* supersessionism. And what I mean by that, you have Christians saying, “Those of you who think that God has rejected the people of Israel, you are wrong.”

H: Right, right. That's the grand finale.

W: "God would never reject Israel. God is going to save them. Make them Christian! And how is God gonna do that? By restoring them to their territory." Now, of course, I just dropped a word on the table that wasn't present anytime before in in the in the book of witness and that. What is that word? *Territory*. It's territory. It's the idea of land as property, land as territory, and the idea of a nation tied to land. And so inside of all of this is the idea that God will restore Israel as a nation like other nations to its territory, in order to accomplish their salvation and the complete salvation of the world.

So what does that mean? You have three or four very bad ideas floating around. You have the idea that a people must understand themselves versus a nation. Terrible idea. Mhmm. Secondly, the people people who understands themselves as a nation must own their land as territory and secure their land as territory. Terrible idea. You have the idea that a people who owns their land is the way in which God will go about bringing salvation to the entire planet. Terrible idea. And then last but not least, you have the idea that God, from the very beginning, only saw Israel as a means to an end. Terrible idea.

H: Ick.

W: So all that means … what did we lose? We lost the vision that's there in Acts 1and 2. In Acts 1, the disciples are looking at Jesus who has risen from the dead with all power in his hand, and they ask … we can even call it a proto-nationalistic question. They ask, "When are you gonna restore Israel to power?" And I can imagine Jesus thinking, "Oh my God. They're not paying attention. And then--but then Jesus says, "I will give you power. Well, go to Jerusalem. The power will come." And then in Acts 2, when the power comes, the sign of the power is that they speak in the languages of other people. And as I like to interpret that, what that indicates is that God is granting to God's people Israel not power over people, but power for people, the power to gather together.

And so what we lose with not only with Christian Zionism, but with forms of Christianity that continue to, align themselves so horribly with nation-states, what we lose is the critical, fundamental trajectory of the Christian gospel to gather together a people from every nation who become a people who give witness to every nation of a different way of living, of life together.

H: It's a bringing together of identities rather than using the identities to create barriers and schisms and lines and power dynamics.

W: And to end the claim, the very bad claim from colonial modernity forward, from 14th-century forward, the very bad claim that land is first something to be owned rather than land being a co-creature, our sibling. The land, the water, the animals. They are not to be owned. They are to be lived with.

B: I'm just overwhelmed by the by the starkness of the distortion that you've just articulated in our brief conversation, from God's power for people enlivening this gathering of nations, this diversity amid oneness in the power of God, to what then becomes a project of being right, dominating, imposing, controlling, and a kind of, sort of hierarchy of supremacy that

then sort of shapes what I presume in our country can become a kind of Christian nationalism. And I wonder if you'd should widen the circle and describe how this entanglement with theology and statehood gets expressed in our particularly American version in terms of the kind of Christian nationalism that we see sort of taking hold in our in our time.

W: Oh, yeah. In many ways, our Christian nationalism is the first.

B: Yeah. Right.

W: It it's it's rooted it's rooted fundamentally in what I was mentioned earlier in this idea that Christian colonial settlers had, that God had given them the world and the responsibility of bringing the world to maturity. And what it formed very early was what I what I call a pedagogical imperialism. So that from the very beginning, Christians--by the beginning I mean they were coming to the new worlds. The Christians imagined themselves, understood themselves as there to teach, there to educate. They are not there to learn, they are there to teach. The only learning is learning as a prerequisite to teaching. The only listening is a listening as a runway to talking, to instructing. So what did that mean? It meant that peoples all over the world were being introduced to Christianity. Let's call them indigenous peoples. Let's call them native peoples. But people all over the world were being introduced to Christianity. What was being put upon them was the need for them in being forced to listen. To become malleable, adaptable, changeable. Try to work who they are to fit the kind of Christianity, the kind of vision of the gospel, the kind of theology that's being presented to them. And for those coming, the missionaries and the others, they understood themselves not as guests in someone else's home, but as hosts. Right. I'm bringing you into God's world. Even though I'm here in your world, it's actually God's world, i.e., our world. And, therefore, I don't have to adapt. I don't have to change. I don't have to become something different in order to be Christian here. You have to become me.

Now that fundamental, that fundamental tragedy, that distortion of Christianity, comes to us to this very moment. So for so many Christians, they believe that we only give witness when we're running our mouth, when we're talking and instructing, when we're guiding and directing. That's when we're revealing the life of God, not when we're quiet, listening, adapting, becoming. So in a sense, the kind of Christianity that we have presented is diametrically different from the reality of the incarnation out of which our Christianity comes. I mean, had Jesus started teaching that too, we would have had a problem.

And I said, no. “No, please. I don't need any milk. I'm God. So just listen to what I'm doing.” But the fact that God became a learner and was yet God … we never got the memo on what that means for Christian witness--that we can witness not by saying anything, just by listening and learning and adapting and becoming. And so that reality runs to us. But here's the piece that grew into something else.

Pedagogical imperialism becomes political and state imperialism. It grows right out of it. So that the western nations take upon themselves the mantle of believing that they are the teachers of the world, the ones who bring the right forms of government, the right forms of economic life, the right forms of social life, the right educational systems to the rest of the world, which the rest of the world is “the developing world,” as it's said to this very moment. So what we have to understand is that Christian nationalism in this country, it has those two energies driving it. It's driven by the belief that the fundamental mission of America, which is rooted in

whiteness--I haven't used the word whiteness, but everything I've said is tied to the information whiteness--But that the fundamental mission of America rooted in whiteness is being undermined unless we understand what God has destined us to do. And the fact that Christianity, if it's going to be true Christianity, isn't going to change, isn't going to be valuable, isn't going to be, isn't going to adapt to other people's ways, other people's forms of being. It's going to impose on other people the right way of being. And so we are yet in the trajectory of a pedagogical imperialism.

It continues to have very bad fruit, poisonous fruit for so many of us.

H: So if we think of ourselves as trees bearing fruit, how do we nourish those trees, nourish our imaginations, cultivate good imaginations. What are some things we can do?

W: Well, I always say we have to start with where we live. And these days, I'm trying to get people to spend a whole lot more attention to the actual creation and to then their actual lives as creatures. And so I always say, the first thing we gotta get people to do is to start to pay a lot more attention to where they live and how they live in place. And to recognize that for so many of us, our discipleship really floats above the ground. It's in our heads. It's in our hearts. It's in the once a week when we come and meet our friends at church and being nice to people who we see. Some of them.

But what we have to recognize is that our discipleship has to actually live on the ground in the dirt in the place that we live. And now, of course, there are a number of problems we have to face. The fact that where people worship often is very different from where they live, and that where they live in many ways is inconsequential to how they live. As one anthropologist, Tim Ingold, says, this is called the problem of inversion, where we kinda live on the surface of the world. Surface here. So we don't we don't live in place. And what that means is that we don't know how to connect to the place and the people of the place. The anthropologist Arturo Escobar always had made this wonderful statement. He made this statement many years ago, and he has repeated it many times. I'll repeat it because it's so great: Our sense of relationality is deeply woven to our sense of connectivity. And if we have a shallow sense of connectivity, we will have a very hollow sense of relationality. That is to say, I don't see myself connected to this place that I am in, that God has led me to.

And so, therefore, the relationships here, I can take them or leave them. They're inconsequential. So I was saying we wanna start there. But then the other thing we want to do, this came to me after I'm just spending so much time in the book of Acts and thinking about this. In the book of Acts, as you'll know, when the spirit comes, people are being asked to do what they don't want to do. And this is the sign of the spirit. The spirit is … and people are like, "I don't … are you sure?" I don't so … people are being asked to do what they don't want to do. And the fundamental thing people are being asked to do is to go be with people they don't prefer not to be. So what I always say and I've and I've done this for years, my friend. I've done this for years, and I've never been proven--I've never had anybody email me and say "That was a terrible idea." You know? "You stop telling people that." But I always say to churches, especially, that as a church community, if you have a public prayer where you say, "Lord, show us the people that you would like us to involve our lives in, not just give money to, but to involve our lives their lives, involve with ours, our lives involved with them. Show us the people that you want us to join." I have never had the experience that a church community or an individual or an individual--that the spirit of God would not almost immediately, immediately put into the minds

individually and collectively the very people that the spirit of God wants you to give. Because 99% of the time, people already know. They walk by them. They drive by them. They look the other way. They already know, and they already know that the spirit has been tapping on your shoulders. Go. Go. Go. Go.

To me, that's one of the fundamental problems we face in the church, and that is--the issue for us is not knowing what the will of god is. I have never been somebody who has ever asked, "Well, what is the will?" The issue always is to stop resisting the spirit. Issue is to yield to the spirit. We are in a world that is adamant and communicative, that is always talking. We're with a God that's always talking. There is speech all around us. There is communication and conversation all around us. The only question is, are we gonna open ourselves to listen, or are we gonna pretend that we don't know?

And so, you know and for some but here's the other thing that we have to think about. And as it comes to, you know, the work I'm doing now, we have to think about the way our built environments, and that is … that means our neighborhoods, our towns, our hamlets, our villages. We have to think about the way they are configured to both dull our senses to a speaking world and isolate us from the very people that God wants us to join. And so our built environments are also participating in our sinfulness and our disobedience and enhancing our distorted imaginations, by the way we are allowing things to be built, allowing developers and real estate people and others to shape our world in ways that absolutely undermine, especially for those of us who are Christian, undermine our discipleship. Our discipleship has to actually hit the dirt. And to the extent that we live a life in which the decisions of the dirt, the decisions of the shape of our communities are not being made with us participating, but being made by a few people with only the concern of profit in mind--that's evil.

B: Professor Jennings, you're speaking of the work of the spirit in such a powerful way. And of course, we're here at Yale University, and there is plenty of plenty of hallways around Yale University in which scholarship of religion happens that's not from a faith-based perspective. You're a person of faith, you're an ordained Baptist minister, and you're a theologian. I wonder how your faith affects the work of doing theology and how your work of doing theology has actually shaped your faith over the years. As you look back, what has that process been breathing with both of those lungs? The one lung of faith, the other lung of …as a scholar and and theologian and how they inform one another?

W: That's a great question. So I I try to hold them both inside where they where they live for me, and that is inside the practices of the faith. As I always tell people, even before I ever heard the term the name Augustine, I was raised in an Augustinian home, which is, it was always faith seeking understanding. I always tell people Christianity was never offered as a choice. When somebody said/asked, when did you become Christians? I said, "What do you mean when did I become Christian? I had no choice. I didn't know those are the options in my household." You were a Christian. When did you believe in Jesus? "What do you mean when did I believe in Jesus? Jesus lives in every meal, every every day." But the beauty of that is that it, faith was never presented to me as something that one chooses to live inside of. Faith was presented to me as something that you live inside of. And if you don't live inside of it, then the choice is … what else is there. Now what that then means for me is that every question that my teachers presented, especially my secular teachers presented, though I didn't have many of those because I went to a Christian college. But later on, I did, of course, when I got to university.

But every question for me was already a question inside of faith. There was no question, no discipline, no thought, no book, no writer, no one who was outside of faith for me. That is to say, I didn't need them to believe. I believed. And in that regard, I could take seriously everything that was being put in front of me.

Of course, the challenge was is that I was also, like so many others, questioning deeply the faith I was inside of. That was never, for me, that was never a crisis of faith. It was a crisis created by faith which is a different matter for me. The crisis created by faith is … how might I understand the ways in which faith is being denied, faith is being undermined, my very life is being distorted by not only my behaviors but the behaviors around me. Not only my way of thinking but the ways of thinking around me. And so I've always been one who's imagined the intellectual life as a free space inside of faith. And outside of faith, there was no freedom.

H: Do you have any words for, maybe, hypothetically, students of ours, I don't know, who come to divinity school or maybe even just some of our listeners getting more and more into theology and having their minds kind of blown open. I think there's often … not something I would call a crisis of faith, but a crisis of cognitive dissonance when someone starts to learn more and more about academic theology, and they expect it to feel different than it does or they expect to not have their mind be changed about things and it does or things like that. The kind of the mental explosion that happens in divinity school. Can you get … do you have words for that?

W: I always say it's welcome to the strangeness of your home. That's what I like to put up for students. And, especially for students who are raised in the faith. Especially if they are raised in the west. Because of what we've been talking about earlier, they were shaped in, even in the best circumstances, they were shaped in a faith that was fairly controlled and controlling. A faith that you could anticipate start to finish what it should be about. And the interesting thing about most divinity schools is that when you go to them, one of the things you start to realize is that the faith that you would have it is far more strange than you imagine. It's like …you have a, you have this beautiful house, and then there's that door that you never went to because your parents were like, “Don’t go in there, don’t go in there.”

H: That's where we keep all the stuff.

W: And then you open it, and it's a huge cave. And bats are flying around, and there’s cobwebs. There was … there's some creature moving in it. They're like, “What is that?” And then you open it, all of a sudden, it was … it's like one of those horror movies. You get pulled in and the door gets closed behind you. And you can't get out for two, three, four, five years. And then when you come out …

H: Come to Yale Divinity School. It's like a horror movie.

W: When you … when you come out, you're like, “Oh my god. This is my house?” Yeah. This is your house. Yeah.

B: There are so many people who are thanking you for this language and this image right now because they thought they were the only ones. Yeah.

W: And these creatures are --live in my house? Yeah. These creatures live in your house. And in fact, they're your family. No. That's not my family. It's nothing like me. No. That's that's your … that's your granddad's … uncle. So … and that's the thing for our students. Many of them, when they come, they realize that they're being introduced to a faith that is not only wider, deeper, more complex, but stranger than they ever imagined. The, you know, the things that they find out, that the ways of thinking, the ways of being that are all yet Christian. Like, "Oh, this is … this is maddening." And so for many of them, many of them will shrink back. And this and … I'm finally I … get the door. I got I found it. I'm out. Did you just go in no. I didn't go there. I didn't go in there. They deny it. They went into it.

H: I'm gonna stick with the picture of the outside. Thank you.

W: But then there are others who, you know, they realize that not only is this a part of the house when they come back to the door, they actually take the door down and so … they go in and out of that from that point on, because they realize this is a part of the faith. And the other thing that's a part of it; if it's going well, students realize that there is nobody, there's nothing so radical, so counter-hegemonic, so radical, that it's "outside of Christianity." It's beyond … because they realize that the categories that they think constitute Christianity don't really constitute Christianity. It constitutes the small part of the house that they were in.

And so, you know, we have students … it's always great when I have students show up and, you know, they think that they now understand better, you know, how limited the Bible is, until they come and they go through that door and they realize, "No. I don't even understand this book. I don't even understand this book. I thought I understood it, but I don't understand it at all. It's much bigger." And so before I decide that I don't like this or that passage of scripture, I'm realizing, "Oh my god. There's so much more to it than what I thought."

H: Yeah. Which again brings us back to this humility that it really is it's beautiful. It's wild. There's so much to be curious about, and you gotta be humble.

W: And also be comfortable with the faith that you never need to control. You never did. Some people come and they think the whole point is for me to control my faith so that I can help others learn how to control of their faith. And that's not the point at all.

H: Also, that's not really --the Holy Spirit doesn't wanna be tamed.

W: It can't be. It can't be. But, you know, the other thing that's always true with schools that, you know, people come with so much, you know, hurt. And so as I, you know, I wrote this poem. I wrote my book *After Whiteness* that segment in this poem where I talk about that some people come to divinity school, they come to seminary, and their goal is to kill God. You know, they come, and the God that's been presented to them needs to die. And I always tell them, you know, "Yes. Welcome."

"We want you to kill God."

"Hate to tell you this. Somebody beat you to it. But guess what? This real one rose from the dead, and I believe that this real one probably is different from the one that you wanna kill." When I first started teaching, I used to think, "Oh my god. This is a crisis.

But now I realize, if you hate God enough to wanna come and kill God, maybe it's not hate that we're talking about. Maybe it's actually love that brought you here, masquerading as hate.

B: I mean, what you're describing is an incredibly hopeful vision. I mean, it might be terrifying to take the first few steps on this journey. But when we surrender ourselves to the Spirit, we're surrendering to a kind of change and transformation that's actually more wonderful, more joyous, more loving and inclusive than we could imagine. So it's hard to imagine changing, but it's actually hopeful, this kind of transformation. So when I listen to you, that brings me hope. But I wonder, Professor Jennings, as you think about all the all the issues our world is facing, our church is facing, you know, the kinds of toil toiling that you've heard from your students, and what keeps you back at it every day? What brings you hope amid all the real hardship and suffering and violence that you're equally sitting with?

W: You know, the thing that brings me the most hope is when I can see, especially in my students, I can see them beginning to hear God's voice in them more clearly. That's a beautiful moment. You know, many of our students run from the voice of God because you know, from things we've already talked about, but also just the kind of sheer embarrassment. I still believe in calling. I still believe in the Spirit's tugging. And many people, for many people, that's a very old fashioned idea. But, you know, I always say to my students, "If you have wound up at a divinity school like Yale, something is wrong with you. People don't come to Yale University to go to the university. They come to Yale University to go to law school, or business school, medical school, or public policy. They don't come to Yale University to go to the divinity school.

So if you come to the divinity school, I don't care what faith or religious tradition or nontradition or atheist tradition that you are part of, you have to understand you're here because you're weird. And you're weird because God has called you here. People don't go to divinity schools or go involve themselves into education unless somewhere in them, there is something stirring brought by God. And so what I love to see, what keeps me going is to have this group of motley people sitting next to each other from all walks of life. It's so fun to watch students who, you know and I … tell them. And, Hannah, you know this very well. I'll tell them, "Okay. Look at look the person next to you. Look at the person right at me. Look. At a university, you might wanna try to blend in, but the minute you say you're at the Divinity School, everybody's going to go, 'Ooooo… Okay …?'"

B: We have all gotten that look.

W: Right. Well, you might you might try to, you know, play it off and act like you, you know … But the truth of the matter, I mean, you can say, "I'm just doing … I'm just doing religion." Wait. Wait. What are you saying? And so there … there is something about that reality that I love every semester to see people, and then to watch them over the course of their career first come to appreciate one another, learn from one another. And if things are going well, start to love one another, to love their queerness as a school of divinity. And then the --for me, the great joy is as they're moving through, you can see in them, that they're starting to listen. Not just to the lectures or the books they're reading, but they're starting to listen for God. And that, at the end of the day, no matter what we face in this world, if people are listening to God, there is abundant hope.

B: I'm so thankful. This has been such a rich conversation. I could ask ten more questions, but I wanna honor your time, Professor Jennings. Oh my gosh. Thank you so much.

H: Thanks for chatting with us.

W: Glad to do so. What a joy, what a joy.

B: Thank you for listening to the Leaders Way. We hope you were encouraged and inspired. To learn more about this episode, visit our website atberkeleydivinity.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.