The Leader's Way Podcast

33: Spiritual Formation and Politics with Kaitlyn Schiess

Kaitlin Schiess: Of all of the things that scripture says, it is one of the things that's most clear on-- is that nations are judged by how they treat foreigners. So we have all these stories about how God -- and it's explicit in the Noahic covenant. It's explicit in the Old Testament law. God judges nations by how they treat foreigners. That puts great obligation upon all nations, including a modern nation like the United States of America, to have policies that reflect this truth about God.

H: Hey, guys. It's Hannah Black. Welcome back to the Leaders Way podcast where we talk about spirituality, leadership, and theology. It is very much September here in New Haven. Part of that is that Brandon is off dropping his daughters off at college. Everything's feeling kind of fizzy and exciting in New Haven as the leaves are just about to turn and the air is about to get crisp. You can feel it coming.

Another thing you can really feel coming is this November's big election. And if you're in the United States of America, you know that. You feel it. If you're not in the United States of America, you're very potentially aware of it. I've heard from many of my international friends how much American politics is making its way kind of elsewhere. If you're anything like me, your social media feeds are full of coconut trees and turkey trot tater tots, and there's this fun leadup to the election. But also if you're anything like me, you're sensing a lot of fear, worry, urgency, and maybe even tough conversations.

If you're in a position of church leadership, it feels very, very probable that your congregation is more politically engaged than they usually are. You may be thinking, how do I talk about this from the pulpit? How do I talk about this over Thanksgiving dinner? How do I talk about this with my friends and my acquaintances? *Do* I talk about this? Do we just keep politics out of it?

These are all very live questions, for people in the church and outside of the church. And I don't know about you, but a lot of my political input is not from spiritual or religious sources. It's from the news, it's from podcasts, and the like. So it's a fun opportunity we have here at The Leader's Way to talk not only about leadership, spirituality, and theology this autumn, but also about how politics fits into that in this really kind of momentous-feeling season. So today, I'm really excited to introduce you to our guest, who is not only a church leader herself, someone who thinks deeply about a lot of the things we care about on this podcast, but someone who thinks deeply also about politics and about how spiritual formation and politics go together.

Our guest for today is Kaitlin Schiess, who I had the pleasure of sitting next to at a women's lunch last year at the American Academy of Religion conference, where our mutual friend, Krista McKerland, put us in touch. Shout out to Krista. Thank you. This episode probably never would have happened without Krista. And Kaitlin is a podcaster herself. She's one of the pundits for the Holy Post podcast, which was created by the creator of Veggie Tales, Phil Vischer and Skye Jethani. She also now has her own podcast out of Holy Post Media, which is called Curiously Caitlin, where she brings on kids' questions, little audio recordings--they're super cute--and answers them with the help of experts in theology. So an example might be, “Do God/do dogs go to heaven?” Or “Why do we sing in church?” Very cute. Highly recommend.

She also is an author. She's written two books, *The Liturgy of Politics* and *The Ballot and the Bible*. And she's a PhD student at Duke Divinity School on top of all of that and being a leader in her church. I sort of just desperately wanna be her friend. So, you know, maybe I just asked her on this podcast so I could be her friend. You could be the judge of that. But, actually, for real, this is a great conversation, and I'm really excited to share it with you. Please let us know what you think, and stay tuned for a little more politics, leadership, theology, and spirituality this autumn at the Leaders Way.

B: Hi. I'm Brandon Nappi.

H: Hi. I'm Hannah Black, and we're your hosts on the Leaders Way podcast.

B: A Yale podcast empowering leaders, cultivating spirituality, and exploring theology.

H: This podcast is brought to you by Berkeley Divinity School, The Episcopal Seminary at Yale.

H: Welcome to the Leaders Way podcast.

Kaitlin: Thank you so much for having me.

H: So glad to have you. So you've been, like, touring the country talking about politics and the Bible. I just read--I actually listened to your book recently. It was like an audiobook foray for me, but that was really fun. And, like, all of my cool chat with theologian friends has been like, "Did you know this? Did you know that? Gosh." Why don't we start with … why did you write *The Liturgy of Politics* and *The Ballot and the Bible*?

K: Yeah. Yeah. So kinda different stories. *The Liturgy of Politics*, I wrote during seminary, which is not something I necessarily recommend anyone do.

H: You know, just write a book on this side.

K: Yeah. Just for fun. I when I started seminary, I was moving from … I came straight from college. I went to Liberty University, and I graduated in 2016. So if anyone knows anything about Liberty or 2016, you might know …

H: The pieces are coming together.

K: Yes. So my last, really, like, year and a half of college was very much, you know, politicians on campus, pundits on campus, national media on campus. Like, it was a question, not just of politics, but a faith in politics was front and center, especially because so many of the politicians that were coming to campus were speaking in our version of chapel called convocation. So you're in a stadium with thousands of college students. You're singing three or four worship songs, and then a politician is getting up and giving a speech. It's just a weird place for faith and politics, and it really it exaggerated some things other people, I think, were observing in smaller doses of how important spiritual formation is for how we think about politics. Because I was going, like, it's not just about political ideas that I think are bad. It's about what it does to your body and your soul to sit in a place where you're in a worshipful posture, and then someone comes in and says, “I will save the world. I will fix the deepest problems of our society.” Like, that does something to you.

And so I had that experience. I thought that was really disastrous. I go to seminary, and I my first semester of seminary is --the 2016 election is actually happening that semester. So I've come off of this intense environment, and I'm watching most of my peers. I just went to seminary having no idea what I would do with it. I didn't grow up in a tradition that ordained women, so I didn't have a plan of working in the church, didn't really know what else I could do. I just was like, I wanna study theology, and I think this is the next step. But most of my peers were gonna go be pastors, and they were like, “I don't know what I'm supposed to do with what's happening.

I'm watching this…" I went to seminary in Texas. Bunch of, you know, churches in the Dallas area were being torn apart by politics. And so people preparing for the pastorate were like, "I don't know what my role is. I don't know where the boundaries are of what it's okay for me to do with pastoral authority and what crosses a boundary, but, also, this doesn't seem to just be a political issue. It seems to be really theological and spiritual."

And so that kind of prompted a lot of studying. Somewhere along the way, I got an opportunity to write a book, and I was like, I know what it's gonna be. It's gonna be about spiritual formation and politics. And it was a really positive experience to have my first time writing a big project, be in an academic environment where I had so many people supporting me, like professors reading chapters, asking for, like, "This assignment in class, can I make it a little bit different than you assigned, and it could help me do research for this book?" Like, it was a really wonderful experience writing it there.

And then didn't think I would write another book for a while, because I finished seminary and went straight into my doctoral program and thought, like, that's a totally ridiculous thing to do is write a book in the second year of your program, but that's what I did. And it mostly happened honestly because the editor that I worked with initially for my first book sent me an email and was like, "Do you have another book in you? Are you interested in writing something else?" And I literally had drafted an email to her that was like, "So sorry. I'm starting a program. There's no way I'm gonna do that." And then I went to get a cavity filled at the dentist.

H: And inspiration struck.

K: Right. Right. And I they, like, put headphones on me, you know, so there's, like, noise, you know, music coming in while it drowns out the noise in your mouth. And I don't know what

happened, but I, like, started outlining this idea for this book in my head. And I got into my car afterwards and left a voice memo for myself that was like, I think this is a book I should write. And I listened to it recently, and it's pretty close to the book that I ended up writing.

H: Wow.

K: It really came out of … In the two years since I wrote the first book, I was doing a lot of speaking. I was going to colleges and to churches, and a lot of the conversations I was having with people centered around both scripture. They would say, "Here's a passage that has to do with politics. How should I interpret this? How should this shape my political life?" And then the second really common thing people would talk about was, like, "How do I have a conversation with my aunt at Thanksgiving or this person that sits next to me at a pew or in my small group or …?" and it was mostly people asking questions about other Christians. Like, it was harder, actually, to have conversations where we had political differences, but we shared the same faith.

So I wanted to write something that would help us think about how scripture informs political life. And I wanted us to have, like, tangible examples to think through. But I thought if I write a book that's like, does Romans 13 apply to Black Lives Matter protests or to COVID restrictions? Like, no one can hear what I'm gonna say because the temperature's so hot. Everyone has opinions. And the second I say anything, you slot me into a camp of, like, what you think Yeah. I believe politically. So I thought, what if I just went to American history?

My undergrad was in history. I really deeply care about theology being influenced by history. And I thought there's great tangible examples that still feel connected to American Christians because there are history, but that might give us something to, like, hold onto and be like, "Okay. In this instance, how does this passage apply or not apply?" But, hopefully, no

one's, like, splitting their family at Thanksgiving over, you know, the Patriots and the Loyalists during the Revolutionary war.

Right. Hopefully, it's hard enough away that you can think like, oh, how interesting. Yeah. Yeah. So that was the start of it, and, thankfully, my adviser did not murder me in my sleep for writing a book in the middle of my program.

H: But I was once told during my PhD that I was really entrepreneurial, which was not a compliment. So I feel that deeply, deeply in a deep way. Oh my goodness. So do you kind of feel like you try to avoid people being able to pigeonhole you as you're going around speaking and wanting people to hear rather than make assumptions?

K: Yeah. And I … my educational background kind of helps me with that because I went to Liberty, I went to Dallas Seminary, and now I'm at Duke.

H: Which looks a certain way. Okay. Yeah.

K: Yes. So it's like it depends. I mean, I've often had it based on the place I'm in. They'll introduce me differently. Like, someone will say in a more conservative environment, like, Kailin to Dallas Seminary, and then they will say anything about what I'm doing now. Or in other environments, they'll be like, “She's at Duke. That's great.” And they'll say nothing about any of the other background.

H: Right. Right. Right.

K: And then it's kind of fun when someone's like, oh, well, I know what you think because of this institution. I can be like, actually, it's more complicated than that. Yeah. And I found, honestly, that a lot of places I go, people will ask at some point, like, “Well, just who are you voting for?” Or, like, “What do you think about this issue?” And there's times that I'll tell people,

especially about particular policy issues. Like, “I'll have some thoughts about, but I love that I get to be in really different environments theologically and politically.” So I try and find a way to be like, I think that some of the spiritual formation stuff, some of the hermeneutics, like, this can be useful in lots of different settings. And I kind of like the idea of keeping people on their toes a little bit about where to where to slot me exactly.

H: Well, it's also it I mean, it says a lot that you kind of need to do that to be able to exist in both of these environments at the same time. And the fact that it's, like, two distinct environments. I can also relate to that a lot. I went to Biola for my undergrad, and I think a lot of people I went to Biola with assume that I think the same things as them. And then I'm here at Yale now, and I think everybody assumes I think the same thing as them. But a lot of these issues, like you said earlier, the temperature is so high that it's actually just really difficult to have the conversation. So I think our default is to assume. We talked about this episodes and episodes ago when we were talking about trans identity, and talking about how in both of the environments I've been in, the conversation isn't really happening. Instead, it's like an assumption of belonging, which implies that you don't belong in the other place.

So with this kind of, like, I don't know, anthropological take on what's going on, what kinds of things are you eager to share about liturgy, spiritual formation, these kinds of things that you were referring to before?

K: Yeah. I mean, I think one thing that I end up saying regardless of the environment because I honestly I used to be in much more conservative environments. Like, I only really got asked to churches or schools that were more conservative. And then when I started … once I got to Duke, honestly, being asked in more progressive areas, I thought, like, “Oh, I'm gonna have to say something very different. Like, they need to hear a different thing.” And that sometimes is

true. And and often when I'm talking to pastors, that's what I'll say is, like, “I can give really general things. The real gift you have to offer is you know your people, and you know where they need to hear something hard, and it's harder for me to know that.” But I've also found that actually a lot of it is the same across environments, which is that a lot of folks have this tendency that I think is a spiritual formation problem to see themselves as the unqualified good guys in the world. Like, we are the people that have the truth, and we will know what to do. And this is what was most surprising, honestly, in in doing research for *The Ballot and the Bible*. I knew I wanted to have a chapter on the social gospel. And I had read some social gospel, you know, theologians, preachers in the past. It not something that really shapes the church traditions that I've been in, so it wasn't something I'm so familiar with. But I'd read it as, you know, a kind of academic exercise. But it wasn't until I got really into that stuff that I saw, “Oh, wow. Like, this is a perennial problem that we think we are the ones that know how to fix the problems in the world, that we are the good guys that can do no wrong,” and it always ends up being paternalistic. It ends up coercing people. It ends up in lots of disastrous places, which was true of the social gospel.

Very good things happened, you know, beginning of 20th century, but a lot of it was ignoring issues of gender, ignoring issue issues of race. A lot of it was paternalistic. There's a Washington Gladden sermon I talk about in the book that is still to me--I love him. I've read so much of the stuff he's written. I think he's wonderful and also wrong in this one way. He has this one sermon where he basically says, “You know, it's just it's so sad that Jesus couldn't get his social program off the ground. Thank goodness we're here to do it for him now.” I mean, it's like, oh, how do you not see, you know, how

H: That sounds like a joke. Like, it's so

K: It does! Yes. It's pompous, honestly. And it but it was so helpful for me then to see that's an impulse that shows up all over the place. Like, that is not limited to one theological strand or one political strand. A lot of the folks I was reading, we would consider, you know, the ancestors of the liberal tradition in the US, theologically and politically, and yet they sounded like modern-day Christian nationalists. They were like, "We're gonna Christianize the world, and we're gonna …" Gladden said that word a lot. "Christianizing the world," being a light a moral light to the nations.

And it's like, okay. That impulse is not limited to one group of people. So I feel like that's what I end up exhorting people a lot towards is humility and curiosity about other people, about scripture, about themselves. And it turns out that the spiritual resources, especially the disciplines that we have that I think make us into healthier people for our political life, everyone needs. Like, that's true regardless of the tradition you're in. And I feel like the ones that help us cultivate that humility and curiosity are some of the best ones. So things like practicing silence and solitude, things like hospitality and practicing, you know, like, very physical, normal generosity with people in your lives, opportunities that you have to keep your hands open and being willing to learn from other people.

And it's also--this is not like a traditional spiritual discipline, but it's one of the reasons I end up talking about kids in church all the time. Because I'm like, we would be healthier people in our churches and in our public life if more of us, especially us intellectual types, spent time with little kids and learned how to befriend them. I mean, I heard this guy Jesus talked about that a lot, you know, being like little children. And I think that's something that gets under underdeveloped, and it doesn't get seen very often when it's like, I have some new program, some new curriculum. I have this great theological idea that will fix all of our politics.

Sometimes I think it's like we receive communion, and we, you know, stand up and make promises to people in church, and we teach Sunday school to little kids, and a lot of that gets under-recognized, as powerful as it is.

H: Yeah. Yeah. Oh my goodness. I have to share a story with you because you in particular will love it. They really reflect … so my friend, also named Hannah, shout out to Hannah, was recently a camp counselor and was talking with the kids in her cabin about what it means that Jesus says, “Come unto me like little children.” And they were like, “Well, adults get so distracted with their jacuzzi meetings about important things …” When, actually, what we should be doing is basically, like, having this earnestness, this humility, this curiosity as, like, a posture toward God. But they thought that what we are distracted by as adults is jacuzzi meetings.

K: I'm gonna start using that. We need to get out of our jacuzzi meetings, guys.

H: This is is a classic jacuzzi meeting. Not the important stuff.

K: That's incredible. That's amazing. Yeah. Yeah.

H: It really I have a lot of questions about the origin of that imagination of adult life, but we'll leave it there. Wow.

H: If you're enjoying the Leaders Way podcast, you might like to join us in person as a Leaders Way fellow. The Leaders Way Yale certificate program combines the best of seminary, retreat, and pilgrimage. Fellows meet in person at Yale for a week in June, then continue their learning in mentor groups online. To learn more, visit our website.

B: You might also like to join us for one of our upcoming online courses or workshops. Our learning space is hopeful, courageous, and imaginative. This year's offerings include courses and workshops on prayer, preaching, conflict management, and more.

H: Clergy and lay leaders from every country, denomination, and seminary background are warmly welcome to join us for all of our programs.

H: Okay. I actually had a question from a listener that I was hoping you could field. It's like a two-part question, so take kind of whichever part of the question. But first, this listener asked, “Is the bible political, like, inherently?” And then sort of the second question, which you can take either one, “Is Christianity political?”

K: Yeah. That's a fantastic question. I think it depends on how we define political. I I probably would say yes regardless of how you define political, but I do think it changes what kind of yes I would give.

H: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

K: When I use the word political, I tend to mean anything involving creating a common life together. I joke when I speak at churches that because I'm a doctoral student, I'm contractually obligated to quote my adviser every opportunity that I get. And, Luke Brotherton says in his book *Christ and the Common Life* that politics is the forming, norming, and sustaining of a common life together. And I …

H: That’s touchier than human Locke.

K: Yeah. It's a really it's such a good, succinct definition because it includes not just the mechanics of government, the forming. Like, you need a structure for how you elect officials or whether you elect officials. You know, however the governing happens, you need a structure for

it. You need norms. You need stories about why we do the things we do, which America is full of stories that we tell about what kind of creatures humans are, how human communities work, and why those things then mean we should do things the way that we do them. And then sustaining. And I'm reading into his definition. I don't know if he would if he would agree with all of this. But the sustaining part to me is, at some level, it all ends up coming down to human relationships. Like, things fall apart, which we're seeing often in our country right now, when we … there's no reciprocal trust. There's no common background. There's no story that we're telling. There's no, I've been just thinking, like, in my neighborhood. Right? Things would break down pretty quickly if I thought my neighbors were enemies out to get me, and I had no ability to, like, have a conversation with them about something that was going wrong in our community. So all of those things are involved in politics.

And once you have that kind of definition, the Bible and Christianity both are super political, because the Bible makes claims about what kind of creatures humans are, how we should live in community together. And wrong ways, colorful stories about wrong ways that we can live well together. So I think in that sense, it's deeply political.

The like, maybe less-yes that I would give that I think is really important, and varieties of Christian communities, I don't think, have done this very well, is recognizing that there is at least some distance. I think the distance depends on the issue, but there is some distance between "Thus saith the Lord, scripture says this." I don't love "the Bible says it, I believe it, that settles it" kind of thing. But there is some things that you're like, "Okay. This is what it says. God has given us this word for God's people." There is at least some distance between that and then the practical work of human governing.

So I believe that scripture is, of all of the things that scripture says, it is one of the things that's most clear on is that nations are judged by how they treat foreigners. Colorful story after colorful story of that is true truth.

H: I'm loving the word colorful. Tent pig, colorful. Yes.

K: Etcetera. I we just, went through Genesis with the high schoolers at my church, and they were like, “This is the most dramatic story. Like, this is wild.” Yes. Colorful is a nicer way of just, like, there's

H: I like it. I like it.

K: So we have all these stories about how God and … it's explicit in in the Noahic covenant. It's explicit in the old testament law. God judges nations by how they treat foreigners. That puts great obligation upon all nations, including a modern nation like the United States of America, to have policies that reflect this truth about God. It does not tell us exactly what those policies should be. And in fact, for us as finite creatures, we should expect that even if we are trying to respond to this truth in scripture with laws that treat foreigners well, we might put laws in place that we think do that, and then we discover that actually it ends up harming someone we weren't even trying to harm, or it doesn't produce the results we wanted it to produce. And that's where we have to think of politics as contingent and provisional. And we're just trying to do the best we can, but we're open to changing our minds. Being able to hold different postures for thus saith the Lord and the politics that we do in response to it, I think, is really important.

That doesn't mean scripture or Christianity is not political, but it does mean that it does not offer just a crystal clear blueprint for what we should do. Which I think can be really amazing. It's actually a real gift of scripture that it doesn't just say, “In this one time and one

place, this is how human communities should live," and it has nothing to say about anything else. No. The fact that it's hard to apply comes from the fact that it represents a bunch of different political structures and a bunch of different people in different times and different voices and different emphases. And that actually means it's better to be a resource for us. It also just means it requires a little more work than we tend to want to do.

H: Yeah. Some kind of translation into our own context. I'm thinking back as you're talking to the way that in the book when you talk about, like, Loyalists versus Revolutionaries using scripture or abolitionists versus slaveholders using scripture. It kind of occurred to me that often one side is doing, like, a "thus saith the lord" thing, but with, like, New Testament, maybe Pauline texts that they feel like they can kind of just copy and paste into their own context. Whereas and maybe, like, it sort of, like, feels fundamentalist sometimes. And then another side will be doing this, like, viewing their story through the lens of Israel's story, using the Hebrew Bible a lot more than the new Testament thing. And I don't know, like, if I want to put value judgments on that, but I just thought that was really interesting.

K: Did you expect that? Yeah. No. And the funny thing is I'm with you in that it I don't wanna put universal value judgments on it because there's another part of the book where I'm talking about the Puritan use of the Old Testament and the New Testament in describing America as a city on a hill from the Sermon on the Mount, but also using all these Old Testament texts to talk about the covenant that they have created with God--That they created with God. And they are doing a more imaginative kind of creative thing where they're seeing themselves in a certain place in scripture. And I think that that is very powerful, which is also why it can be dangerous. It doesn't mean it's always bad or always good. It just means, actually, most of the time, that's the narrative that wins the day because we're storytelling creatures, and we want to

exist in a dramatic cosmic story in which we have some part to play. And the good news is, like, I think that's true. It's just discerning what that means for on-the-ground policies is actually really hard.

And one thing I didn't expect in doing research, but I did end up kind of putting in the book was, especially in the Civil War chapter, I was a little frustrated reading a lot of mostly historians that were trying to describe how scripture was used in that period. And they would describe not, like you just said, a more fundamentalist kind of reading, which I think is actually the better word to use. They would talk about the literalists. The literalists were the proslavery people, right? Because they said Paul said, "Slaves, obey your masters." Abraham owned slaves …

H: It's right here in Ephesians.

K: There you go. Right. That's it. God said it. I believe it. That settles it. And then there were the --and it was usually white abolitionists were the counter. They often-- a lot of historians, even up until pretty recent times, would mostly ignore black free and enslaved Americans that were writing about this. So it'd be the literalists in the South that were proslavery and then the, like, creative liberals in the North that sort of said, like, "We can, we don't have to get into the nitty gritty details of the Bible. We just believe, like, overall, God is love, and love means we don't enslave people," which I agree with that. That is true. But they totally missed the enslaved and free black Americans who were literalist in a certain sense. Like, they were like, "God literally got his people out of slavery, and God will literally do that for us too."

And so it complicates the narrative. I mean, to your point about, like, story versus, like, here's the proof text … It's not easy to give a list of hermeneutical rules that will prevent you from misusing scripture. It's not easy to look at all the history and say, "Well, here are all the

people that did it right, and every time you use their rules, you will do it right, and here's people who did it wrong." It's so much more complicated than that, which is why I feel like …

H: A lot of it has to do with, like, the genre of the biblical texts themselves. Because Paul lends himself to, like, a little copy and paste. Like, put it in your political speech, put it in your, you know, whatever. Whereas with the Old Testament narratives, you really do have to do that work of imagining. Because they're narratives.

K: Yeah. It's, like, not how humans work, that if we're just given a list of rules, we'll just do it. Right? Like, that's just not how we work. So I realized, like, halfway through writing the book, I was like, "Oh, I thought I had written the first book about spiritual formation, and then this is the book about how you read the Bible. And instead, this is, like, also about spiritual formation!" Because it turns out, like, you need good spiritual formation to read the Bible well too. Like, you can have great hermeneutical rules and plug in all the pieces correctly, and you will still pop out with wrong answers if you're not examining the condition of your heart, and you're not having your community help you, and you're not practicing things that make you receptive to hearing hard things in scripture. It's incredible how good we can be at hermeneutics and then read something we don't want to follow and find creative ways around it. And that's, like, the history of American biblical interpretation.

H: True. The Bible is saying exactly what you want it to be saying.

K: Yeah. Wild how that happens.

H: I think part of the, like, guardrail for interpreting imaginatively Old Testament narrative has to be, like, not viewing yourself as, like we were talking earlier, the person who's just definitely right. The thing … one of like, my favorite factoid from the book is when you're talking about the imagining of the national seal. And I think, was it Jefferson and Franklin who

had these ideas? And I think, like, tell me if I'm wrong. Jefferson wanted it to be the Israelites following the pillar of cloud and fire. And then Ben Franklin wanted it to be the Egyptians drowning in the Red Sea. Because obviously, obviously, our national identity is being super right.

K: Yep. The chosen people and watching our enemies destroyed.

H: It's a little … it's a little violent for my taste in art … Like, art for a nation.

K: Yeah. It is really wild how yeah. Like I said, for how perennial that is, that we're just like, we are the right guys. We're the people doing the right thing. Like, we will not make mistakes. We will not … and it's interesting. Like, even the folks in the civil rights era, the abolitionists, especially black abolitionists, were often the ones also turning it on themselves and being like, "This says something about the condition of our hearts, and we have to repent of the ways that we are wrong." And it makes, you know, modern historians really uncomfortable how often folks in that era were turning it back on themselves because they're like they wanna say, like, "Oh, you don't have to say that. You don't have to, you know, be so harsh on yourself." And in retrospect, we can feel that way. Absolutely. But it is interesting that to them, it was like, this is both true. It is both true that I need to repent and be right with God, and also there is unjust structures in my community that are oppressing my people. And God is the same God that he was when he saved his people from slavery, and he'll do it again. And that is uncomfortable for us today, but it's a really good word of, like, "Oh, actually, is there something about that that helped them do this really well? Like, be really faithful in fighting this fight that it was both an external and an internal transformation?"

H: Yeah. Yeah. So with all of this historical context and then with your kind of inside view of the evangelical church with, like … Here in Episcopal land, we're aware of the

evangelical church, but, like, we largely don't identify with it, as, like, a community. So I'm wondering, like, with all of this context and with your perspective in the evangelical church, what are you seeing? Like, what are you picking up on, noticing? Does that question kind of make sense?

K: Yeah. Yeah. The reason it's kind of hard to answer is evangelicalism is such a huge, diverse thing. In fact when I when I started my program at Duke, we had a conversation in one of my classes about evangelical political theology, and the whole conversation was about charismatic, Pentecostal folks. And I was like, "I grew up I grew up a dispensationalist. Like, we are on the other end of the spectrum from them." So it is a weird, diverse world. I alternate between being disheartened and encouraged constantly because I am traveling all the time very often to evangelical churches and colleges, universities, and I'm constantly meeting especially young people, who are not just disheartened by the evangelical legacy of political engagement. They are also really hungry for theological resources for how to do it better. And they're also very often … You know, I was just speaking at a at an evangelical college recently, and a young woman there asked me, "How do I learn to talk really well with my family members who are all super conservative politically, you know, really caught up in in some of the far right, you know, evangelical stuff?" And I was just like, what a beautiful thing that you disagree with them. You see some failures in that camp, you wanna figure out how to talk to them well. And you're empathetic to the struggles that those particular people have, which is another thing I would say about, like, evangelical world is that --this just happened recently. I was … not recently, it was, like, a year ago. But I was at a seminar colloquium thing for theology and ethics at Duke. And during the response time to a paper that was given, I said something offhand about, like, "I'm probably the only one in this room that's on evangelical Twitter," and then made the point I was

trying to make." And afterwards, someone asked me, they were like, "Oh, so what are you studying about evangelicals?" And I was like, "Oh, no. I am not studying them. I am them.

I'm so sorry. You misunderstood. It's me." And … but it was so funny because I tweeted that, and there were a bunch of people that were like, "It's so nice to know there are people who don't even know about evangelical Twitter, and they have no idea." And I was like, "You know how many evangelicals don't know about evangelical Twitter?"

H: Right. It's a very specific slice.

K: Yes. Well and there's just, like like, all communities. Right? There's, like, the talking head version of this, the people who speak for them, the people who have the podcasts and write the books and are the pastors of the mega churches and all that kind of stuff. And then … and it's easy to talk about in the abstract evangelicals when it comes to those books. Oh, yeah. But then I'm, like, at an evangelical church, and there's a woman sitting in the pew behind me. And it's like, she's been totally influenced by some, like, Fox News kind of political stuff, but then she also has been, like, reading Jamar Tisby's book, and she has all these questions about racial justice. And, like, she is a complicated composite person who … I can't really fit into the, like, abstract evangelical. The polling does not describe her to me. And that's the real gift I feel like I've been given in traveling so much is I meet such different people with different stories, and it helps then as someone who professionally ends up reading a lot of the kind of big metanarrative stuff that gets told about evangelicals and can go, "That's really helpful." I'm not saying it's not truthful at all, that the polling is unhelpful. It can be helpful. But it doesn't give any color to the to the reality of the folks that I'm usually interacting with, who many I disagree with so deeply. And yet when I'm not talking about the talking heads, when I'm talking about, like, the people in

pews, they tend to really want to do a good thing. Like, they want to follow Jesus. They wanna be faithful in their communities. I have some harsh words for the folks that are taking that desire and twisting it and using it for really wrong political ends. But I'm always careful to not let my ire for those folks who are making money off of distorting those people's theology transfer into ire for the people in the pews.

H: Yeah. Gosh. And what you're reminding me of is something that I kind of carry with me. We're asking these questions a lot on this podcast during this season about, like, how do you talk to Aunt So-and-So at Thanksgiving, Uncle, whoever, you know, that thing. And one thing that I always keep in mind is, like, people are just out here doing their best. They're doing the best with the information they've been given. They're … if they're going to church, it's, you know, probably out of people aren't just, like, walking around ill-willed, trying to thwart the good guys and thinking of themselves as the bad guy. What is that?

K: Right. I'm the evil villain, actually.

H: My, like, go low version is "We out here doing our best." My go high version is, like, "Aristotle taught us that, and it remains true. Augustine picks it up," but, like, we're doing we're doing our best. Like, we're really aiming toward the good, the beautiful, the true, and there are, like you said, reasons we might misunderstand what's good, beautiful, and true, but that's what we do as humans is… the best.

K: Yes. I probably the thing I end up saying the most often when I'm speaking places because, inevitably, someone will ask, like, yeah, "How do I have this conversation with so and so?" And I'll often say, like, One of the best things you can do in a conversation with someone who really disagrees with you, especially politically, and it starts getting heated, which is when it's hardest to be rational and, like, calm and helpful is when it starts getting really… it deals

with, like, deeper issues of family and what you believe and are you a good person, and it gets really heated. One of my favorite things to do is to just pause for a minute and ask, “This seems really important to you. Can you tell me a little bit more about why?” Because, honestly, like, 80, 90% of the time when I have asked that question of someone, their response has not been policy details or a campaign slogan or it's mostly like, “My dad taught me to believe this.” Or this scary thing happened in my neighborhood, and I'm connecting it to this issue.

H: It's community, values. Yeah.

K: Then you're getting into the real stuff. You're not just staying at the, like, we're angry on a surface level thing. It's like, no. I, like you said, I'm gonna assume you are trying to do a good thing. You're oriented towards the good, and you're confused just like I am. That's the other thing. I--whenever I text people, I'm like, you also have to turn it back on yourself and be like, I am totally imperfect in my desire for my community to be flourishing, in my desire to see my neighbor's needs fulfilled. Like, not only do I make mistakes in terms of just, like, judgment about what's right, I think this policy will help and it doesn't, but I have all these, like, prideful, complicated motives for all of that that get twisted up in there. And if I wanna assume that of you, I wanna assume that of me. Both that we're both trying to do a good thing and that we're a little, you know, distorted along the way in how we try and do it.

H: Distorted. Nice Augustinian. Yeah. Yeah. Okay. So we've kind of, like, had the Thanksgiving chat which most people can relate to. What words of advice do you have for people leading churches through especially political times?

K: Yeah. I think one of the best things I can say because often pastors will ask me, “What's the, like, passage I can preach on?” Or, like, “What's the Sunday school curriculum you would recommend?” And I love a lot of that stuff. I do a lot of, like, going to churches and

preaching or doing a workshop or, I'm perfectly happy to be the person your congregation can get mad at instead of you, if that's what you are looking for.

But what I have found most actually helpful is if from the pastor's perspective, and then that pastor can instruct and guide Sunday school leaders and small group leaders and, you know, teachers and all those kind of folks in this as well, is when I come to scripture, I assume that this always says something to my personal spiritual life and to my public political life. And I try my best to make that a part of our regular rhythm of a community is that we assume that scripture says something to our public life. And then if that's just, like, a regular rhythm of our life, when we come to a passage in scripture that talks about God judging nations by how they treat foreigners or that talks about how communities can unintentionally end up with great wealth inequality and need mechanisms for adjusting that. When we come to passages that could have real clear political implications, it's not like we suddenly took a day off from our regular stuff and started doing political stuff. It's like, no. We're just accustomed to this being what happens. Like, we have these conversations regularly. And that, I think, will have long term much more effect, much greater effects, especially because it's always like a month or two before the election that pastors--And it's not as if it's pastors. It is fully it is school administrators. It is business leaders. Like, it is everyone that's like, “Okay, we're going to deal with it now.” And there are very limited things we can do now.

I mean, truly, I would say, like, right now, your job is being curious about other people, being, as much as you can, an unharied presence that can be the calm voice in a conversation. And then you start thinking, okay, we're gonna have another presidential election in 4 years. Mhmm. That's actually still a kind of short amount of time. Four years is like the shortest possible time to change a culture of a community. So what are we doing now to say, like, we will

be people where this conversation is important? It gets heated because it deals with really crucial things. It's not ridiculous for it to be hard, but we're a place where we're practiced in it, and it's not so unusual that it's harder than it needs to be.

H: Yeah. I think well, and with, like, our Thanksgiving chat focused around thinking about why people feel the way they feel in terms of community and story and values, and then in thinking about the way one might preach … I'll say, like, when get things get political, which could be from the text, or it could be kind of, like, what's going on that we need to prove to. Both of these visions are ones where you didn't have to do a lot of homework ahead of time or cram or, like, know the right stuff or, you know, like, uh-oh. What if I haven't been watching the news lately? Uh-oh. What if I haven't read all of Project 2025? Which, like, let's be honest, who has? It's giant.

K: It's huge. Yeah.

H: You know, you don't need to be fully read in to be able to engage. And I think that's important for people to hear, especially people who are like, "Uh-oh. It's the 11th hour. I feel like I need to say something or have some kind of conversation, but I don't know what conversation to have." It's just about, like, our communities and what we care about and, you know, the values that we can uphold with our vote. So that's really helpful.

One, like, final thing maybe I wanna ask you is, what's your hope for American politics? And maybe even the church's role in American politics, if you wanna go there.

K: Yeah. To be honest, I don't know that I have much hope for American politics. In the long term, I don't. But, actually, it relates to … I hope that more people, not just Christians, but other people as well, would place less of our ultimate hopes in this political process, and then that would actually make us healthier in this political process. Like, when we divest this of some

of our deepest senses of identity and belonging and our hope for our families and our communities, I think it can actually function better, if we're not having all of the fights in it that are really prior fights to politics. And this is why; I didn't say this earlier, but one of my other things that I often will tell pastors is, I think one of the best things you can do is preach not only on the end of the story. Like, I think preaching on Revelation 21 and the vision of eternity that Christians believe-- that Christ will return to make all things new and wipe every tear from every eye and be in perfect relationship with each other and with God--that's the vision that motivated the civil rights leaders. They said, like, we can fight for justice. And even if we meet failure here and now, we believe justice is coming. God has promised it. That's is a deeply important message. Bigger than America.

H: Yes. Yes. Kind of get our hands dirty.

K: Yes. And and so maybe Revelation. I know it sounds crazy to be like, you know, we should do some Revelation, but I think that could be really powerful. But also going to places in the prophets. Like, I've been really --I truly have. I set up a reading plan for myself for the two months before the election to just read through all the Old Testament prophets. And something that I've been struck by that I think would really … gives me a lot of hope, and I think would shape a lot of our churches more healthily, is that two of the most consistent themes in the prophets are, #1, You're doing bad things and you should stop doing them, which sometimes feels like such a word right now. I'm like, you have called out exactly what's happening.

But the second note that I've never quite noticed before is how often the prophets are basically saying, like, "You are already held and claimed by the God who keeps promises." Why have you forgotten that? Why have you forgotten who you are?"

H: It's the forgetting. Yes!

K: Yes. And so I just think that's what gives me, like, ultimate hope is, like, we are claimed and loved by a God who keeps promises and has promised really important things. And maybe if we settled in that a little bit more, we could do our political life from a more rooted place. We could say, like, “I'm seeking the justice my community needs because the material needs of my neighbors really deeply matters. I'm not engaging in politics as a way to prove I'm a good person, to give me a sense of community, to make me … to feed some inner need. I'm actually … I am claimed and loved by a God who keeps promises. And from that place, I can do politics in a healthier way.

H: I think we should end there because that was beautiful. Thanks for listening to the Leaders Way podcast. You can learn more about this episode at divinity.yale.edu/podcast. Follow along with us on Instagram at theleadersway.podcast.

B: And you can rate and review us on your podcast app and be sure to hit follow so you never miss an episode. And if you'd like this episode, please share it with a friend.

H: Until next time.

B: Peace be with you.