

Episode 12: Hunkering with Brandon and Hannah

[MUSIC]

Hannah: Brandon and I have talked before about how we are basically golden retrievers. I want to smile at you. I want to say hi. I want to be friends right back.

[MUSIC]

Hannah: Happy New Year. Yay.

Brandon: Happy New Year.

H: So I'm hoping, Brandon, what we're feeling right now, the weariness, the grump, it's just a little bit of death before a resurrection. Is that pagan of me to say for like a December, January? It's not like it's Easter.

B: Well, I mean, I am appreciating the theological reframe, whether it's pagan...

H: Orthodox or not?

B: Yeah, no, I mean, I think God is speaking through all of creation. I think that the lack of light is really affecting me.

H: Yeah. Yes. I feel that so much, especially because I didn't grow up in a climate like this. But I have seen so many memes and things lately that are like, don't forget, you're a part of nature too. It's okay if you just want to like hunker a little, nap a little, eat some nuts and wait for the spring. [LAUGHTER]

B: I feel like hunker is the word of the day. I need to put that on my door.

[MUSIC]

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

B: Well, I mean, I'm really excited for this conversation because we've had so many, I hope, profound and moving and inspiring and rich theological conversations. And in this episode, we're going to give the people what they want, Hannah.

H: [LAUGHTER] Which is what, Brandon?

B: Which is a glimpse into the inner working of your mind. No, the people haven't actually told us what they want, but this is me thinking, wouldn't it be cool if we really got to know one another and our listeners got to know us a little better? I was thinking, tell us what you want.

H: DM us at Berkeley at Yale because that's just me. I will see your message and then we can give the people what they want.

B: Totally. Slide into Berkeley's DMs.

H: [LAUGHTER] Exactly. Exactly.

B: And we have listeners from around the world.

H: Yes. I have this beautiful map up right now. I just want to say 81% of our listeners are in the US, which like, yes, we're also in the US, makes sense. But then we have 7% from the UK, almost 6% are from Australia. And then we've got listeners in Canada, France, Germany, Lesotho, Luxembourg, Portugal, Poland, Switzerland, Barbados, Brazil, Chile, I'm not even done, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, and Taiwan.

B: Wow. That's so cool.

H: In the US, this can be a little competition among our listeners. Connecticut's coming in at number one, makes sense. We are Connecticuties. Number two, New York, number three, Virginia, number four, California, then North Carolina, Indiana, Massachusetts, Washington, Texas, Minnesota, New Jersey, Georgia, Illinois, Pennsylvania, honestly, all over the place, DC. This could be like a little game. The only states we haven't reached are Nevada, Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota, Kansas, and West Virginia.

B: Oh my gosh, we need you.

H: I know.

B: Where are you?

H: If you have a friend who lives in North Dakota, send them the link. I want this map filled in.

B: I'm feeling so much gratitude for all of the folks, this little community from around the world.

H: Well, if you're here now, I think that counts as being here from the beginning, which is so special to us because, I mean, the world is so many podcasts. It's really just great that people are tuning in, enjoying what we're doing. Well, I mean, maybe they're hating it. That's the other thing, leave a review because I don't know. Maybe you hate it.

B: Oh, we could use a review or two. Yeah. We're a little lean in the review department. What

I'm noticing in the geography here is there's a pretty tight competition between our listeners in Australia, between New South Wales and Victoria. New South Wales ahead just a bit with South Australia lagging in the third position. So thank you to our friends who are down under. It's so fun. Do they actually say "down under" down under?

H: That's a great question. I know based on my light TikTok obsession that they listen to very different Christmas music. So maybe that's a question for Andrew.

B: Oh, right. Our Australian Dean. Yeah. Note to selves, we should do a Christmas music episode next year and do some Christmas music reviews.

H: Reviews! We also have to somehow make it a game. Like who knows the words to the seventh, what's it called? Not a stanza. What's in a hymn? Thing of O come, O come, Emmanuel.

B: Verse. It's verse.

H: Thank you.

B: Oh, yes. At the Advent service last week, we went whole hog and they all maybe nine. It was sort of a separation of sheep and goats and everybody's sheep. And by verse two, you still have a lot of sheep in verse three, four. But by the end, everybody's looking at the bulletin or the hymnal.

H: Yeah. Brandon, I have a question for you. It's January 1st. It's a moment of reflection, a bit of a year in review moment. Do you have a favorite episode so far?

B: This is a little like choosing my favorite child or my favorite cat. So really hard. I mean, I do have some highlight moments. I mean, certainly our conversation with Craig Minawa was a real highlight.

H: Coming next week.

B: Oh, yes. Someone who bridges the world of spirituality and music. Yeah, I was just so touched by his depth of sharing. And for all of the countless interviews that he did, he was, I think, as excited as we were to have this conversation about the overlap. I mean, the conversation early on with Sister Ilia about Teilhard de Chardin was really interesting to me. Our conversation with Sophie Grace. But I think, if I'm honest, your being on the podcast, I think is what I'm most thankful for. In the first couple of episodes, I flew solo. And I think the podcast is exponentially more vibrant.

H: That's so sweet.

B: Yeah, what about you? What stands out?

H: Okay. My first favorite is the episode that was my first episode and the only one where I have flown solo, which was my conversation about the devil with the Reverend Dr. Gabrielle Thomas, which at the moment, speaking of rankings, is our number one listened to episode, which is very cool. I think the people want to hear about the devil and also the people love Gabby Thomas.

My other favorite is easily the Sophie Grace Chappell one. I just thought that was so beautiful. She was so generous to be so vulnerable with us, telling us about what it was like to grow up being trans and almost having a Paul, scales falling from the eyes moment where in a past life she was really conservative and thought that Christianity demanded for her to scrub this part of her away, but then realizing, "No, no, this is how God has made me. This is how I'm supposed to be." It's just so moving. I touched on this before, but it's something I haven't been privy to a lot of conversations about, but it's really important. I'm really thankful that that's out there for people to listen to.

B: You're helping me remember that in some ways that episode, well, I think it showcased what in the ideal world we're best at. There was the voice of a believer. There was the voice of a scholar. There was the voice of a culture critic.

We were able to weave together, I think, the things that you and I can- We really care about. Yeah. Yeah. Here's to a new year of episodes that integrate all the things that we love and care about.

H: Yeah, I think that's exactly right. For our listeners, I sent Brandon a meme of Mike Wazowski and Sully from Monsters, Inc. It said, "Every pair of podcasts hosts is these two." I was like, "But who's who?" I don't think either of us is quite a Mike or a Sully. Honestly, I think maybe we're both Mike Wazowski, but there is a fun power team dynamic between the two of us where you're more of a preacher, I'm more of a theologian. You've got this whole scholarship and practice and the world and thing going.

B: I think that's a lovely way to talk about us. I aspire to be that myself. I think the people need to weigh in. We need to hear from you. Who's Mike? Who's Sully?

H: We talk about how you teach homiletics...We'll refer to that every once in a while. I'm just wondering, what's your background? When are you preaching? Why are you preaching? You're not a priest, so tell us who's Brandon the preacher from whence.

B: Wow. Okay. I was prepared to talk about my favorite snack food. You caught me off guard, which is Cool Ranch Doritos, by the way.

It is, yeah. Well, it's both funny and a great comfort to me how God works. It's also incredibly frustrating at times. This is one of those moments when I experienced the hand of providence

as just pure blessing. I was a third-year graduating student at Yale Divinity School. Gosh, I was 26 years old and as a lay Roman Catholic who had spent some time in seminary, spent tens of thousands of hours praying and listening and looking for guidance. In one sense, feeling called to ministry, but not feeling called to ordination always felt called to be a husband and a father. Of course, in the Roman Catholic tradition, that's not an option at the moment.

The skies parted and I was offered a job and received this calling to lead retreats at Holy Family Passionist Retreat Center, this wonderful, thriving Roman Catholic community, the biggest Catholic retreat center in the world. Over 20,000 folks every year made their way to this sacred space. In my earliest days of ministry, I was presiding at various liturgies and preaching two and three times a weekend and working as a spiritual director and also helping to give leadership to the maybe 60 employees that we had and fundraising. It was all the things that it was really powerful and really beautiful. I was thrust into preaching and thrust into walking with people as they moved through the great joys of life, the greatest heartaches of life and everything in between. I just felt over time this magnetic longing to be of service to people in their spiritual life.

I think of my ministry, almost 25 years of my ministry, is a combination of spiritual director and preacher and holding together the needs of individuals but also communities of people. On the one hand, my ministry is very intimate. So much of my work has been one-on-one or in small groups. So much of my ministry has also been preaching in front of hundreds of people. Over the years, so intrigued by that interplay, I went on to continue my studies and studied at Aquinas Institute, this wonderful Catholic Dominican school that specializes in preaching.

It's the great love of my life to walk with our seminarians and divinity students as they take sometimes their very first steps in preaching. It's just a great thrill. It's such tender space. It requires so much faith, so much trust. And yeah, it's a deep honor and blessing to have that role. Oh my gosh.

What about you, Hannah? I know that most recently your journey came through Cambridge and PhD studies in theology. Can I hear a little about your journey and how did your journey unfold over the years?

H: Yes. Okay, first I'm going to tell you a story that we may end up cutting. Then I'm going to answer that question.

The very first time I preached, I was a sophomore in high school. I was on a missions trip in Kitale, Kenya, which I have some seriously mixed feelings about, especially short term missions trips, but that's what the church I was at was doing and they had kind of like a long standing relationship. So we went and on Sunday, they broke us up into like five or 10 groups to 10 different churches. So I'm in this car on a bumpy road, like sardines in the back and the pastor of this church goes, "By the way, you'll be preaching."

And I was like, "Okay." So I'm just panicking, I'm sweating. And then we get there and there are pictures of this, which is kind of like the only reason I believe it happened.

So I get up there. I guess what we have to call a sermon, I get off stage, immediately I have no recollection of what just happened. It was such a crazy experience of the Holy Spirit being obviously at work in my life, which was just wild. And the church I grew up in wasn't very charismatic. It was certainly like, "Woo-hoo, we love the Holy Spirit," but not totally that way. So it was just like a bizarre experience. And then I didn't preach at all until I was in a leadership position at Clare College Chapel in Cambridge. And I had degrees in theology and things like that, and awareness that I was going to preach.

B: I love the extremity of those two poles. You're first preaching like no training at all.

H: I had a translator, that was the other thing. I was saying things and then somebody was translating them.

B: Oh my gosh. Holy cow.

H: I know.

B: And then preaching like, overqualified.

H: I'm like wearing a Harry Potter robe, reading my thing.

B: Do you remember what you preached on the very first time?

H: I remember sharing kind of like what at the time I would have called some of my testimony and talking about, I think really just God being there for you in times of trouble. That's it. That's all the only recollection I have.

B: Oh, it's timeless. It's a timeless...

H: I do remember afterwards during kind of like praise and worship time, there was a full-blown conga line and I was like, this is living. This is awesome.

B: They were celebrating your message.

H: (sarcastic) Yes. Totally.

It's one of those things where I'm like, that was not me, Lord. That was a billion percent you.

B: This is a great reminder with students because there's often so much nervousness. Yes. For folks who are preaching for the first time, for folks who maybe are unclear what they believe, there is a kind of pressure that folks feel, real or imagined, to be brilliant, to be eloquent and say

something astonishing. I think in seminary in general, but certainly at Yale Divinity School in particular, right? And so everyone is just wanting to be brilliant and we often have to remind ourselves that trusting in God working through us, speaking in our voices, this mystery is really the most important thing to remember.

H: Yeah. I also... You know the times in your life when people come up to you and they're like, "Oh my gosh, that's exactly what I needed to hear." It's always when I'm feeling my worst. Like, this is not brilliant. This is just like broken Hannah. Sometimes out of 10, that's the one that touches people.

B: Isn't that funny? Yeah. When you think you've hit it out of the park, it's crickets.

H: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, absolutely.

B: But we were in the midst of your story. Yeah. How did you get to Cambridge? I mean, talk about rarefied places. Like I'm not even sure Cambridge exists. It's just a fairytale land.

H: It's actually a fairytale. Yeah.

So, gosh, let's see. It's really a question of how far back to go. I grew up in the church. I grew up at an evangelical, non-denominational mega church and then went to a very evangelical college for undergrad because I wanted to study biblical and theological studies. So that's what my major was in undergrad. I honestly had no idea that not specifically Christian institutions had programs like the one that we are currently working at. So I was like, "This is it. I'll go study theology. It's going to be great." I really didn't have a career in mind at all.

And part of why I went to Biola was because I was simultaneously working as a performer at Disneyland, which was great. So I was like reading Hume on the imagination backstage while I'm listening to Fantasmic! go like, *singing* "Imagination." It's like Mickey's shooting fireworks out of his fingers and my co-workers are like, "What is this person doing?" So that was my life as an undergraduate.

And then honestly, part of it was Greek. I loved learning Greek and I loved the great books program that I did, which is called the Torrey Honors College in which I was introduced to Plato, Aristotle, the church fathers, the medieval, so much Dante. I took one class, Brandon, that was just reading the Comedy, I think seven times in a row, front to back over one semester. So much fun.

Yeah, I studied abroad at Oxford as an undergrad. And while I was there, I had a real crisis where I was like, I feel like I should maybe be teaching, but I'm not sure whether I should be a high school teacher or if I should go to grad school and try to become an academic. And already at the time, the job market was bad for academics. So that has been on my mind the whole time. This is why I ended up at a place like Cambridge. I was just afraid that nothing would work out if I didn't go to someplace amazing. So taught at my alma mater high school for a year, I

taught English literature and composition while I was applying for grad school, which happened because my high school principal called me on my cell phone the week of my college graduation and was like, could you teach English? We'd really love for you to apply. I was like, well, Hamlet's going to be so spiritual, you won't even believe it. Yeah, I'll apply.

So did that, applied to grad schools, decided to go to Cambridge, did my master's in Cambridge, was lucky enough to be able to stay on for my PhD. And over the course of my PhD, I became what's called the Decani Scholar at Clare College, Cambridge, which sort of means like the dean of the college who's Mark Smith, who's fabulous. And he is both the dean and like the priest in charge of the college because there's a chapel because it was founded in the early 1200s. And there used to be a dean and a chaplain, but the way it's structured now is there's a dean and a Decani scholar. So it's a student who assists the dean doing all kinds of things. And it does tend to kind of, I mean, thanks to Mark, it tends to shift depending on who's in the role. So that's when I did a little bit of preaching. I cantored for the choir. I lit a lot of candles. I hosted game nights for the volunteers. I had like a lot of interesting conversations and ate a lot of soup on Tuesdays.

Yeah, so that's my journey into theology, really. I could talk a lot about my actual research and why it is what it is and whatever, but I'm sure that's an episode for another time.

B: Well, that's what I wanted to ask a little bit about. So I wonder, I mean, maybe we should do like the doctoral dissertations episode. That would be sort of fun.

H: That would be very fun.

B: But give us like a little glimpse of what you spent several years dedicating your mind and life to.

H: Yeah. Well, and I'll give it to you in story form because it really started when I first read the Church Fathers. I was like, hot dog. Nobody told me that theology could be this glorious because it's like contemplative. It's poetic. There's so much wonder about God in the Church Fathers. And so I was like, these are my people. I love this. And in particular, I was reading Athanasius and Irenaeus and Gregory of Nazianzus. So when I did my study abroad in Oxford, I focused on the patristics with the Dean of Pembroke, Andrew Teal, who really like fanned the flame of my love for the Church Fathers. And in the time that I was there, I don't know why. Maybe one of our listeners knows the story behind this. But there were like 10 or 15 portraits in Andrew Teal's office of different Church Fathers. So as I'm being like, oh, I think Augustine, blah, blah, blah, whatever, Augustine's like looking at me in oil form.

So I felt like I was surrounded by these very human theologians. And I was just like so in awe about their mode of doing theology. So my very favorite paper I did was on the Cappadocians. So by the time I was applying for master's programs, my proposal was all about the Cappadocians. After growing up in an evangelical context, I was really interested in the idea of lifelong sanctification. And something that Dante and Bernard of Clairvaux had taught me in the

Torrey Honors College was that my salvation wasn't necessarily just for God to use me, if that makes sense, "use" in scare quotes.

My salvation is enough because actually God just loves me and becoming more and more in the image of God, becoming closer to God, becoming more virtuous by means of becoming more in the image of God. That's the end goal.

The end goal isn't necessarily just to trick other people into becoming Christians, which is kind of a caricature version of the opposite. So I was like, "Okay, I want to work on the Cappadocians and how salvation works, how spiritual transformation works," is what the title was at first actually. So I did that for my MPhil under Ian McFarland. And then Ian came back to America, so I needed a new supervisor. So for my PhD, I worked under Simeon Zahl, who encouraged me to stretch that project in a couple of new directions. And he's the theological expert when it comes to affect theory, so that became a key ingredient. And then the other thing is he was like, "Have you read feminist soteriology at all? Have you read what the feminists have been saying about problems with the doctrine of atonement?" And I was like, "No, those were as good as banned books in my past. So no, I haven't sinned and picked one of those up."

So reading feminist theologians like Rita Nakashima Brock and Dolores Williams, which I guess feminist and womanist theologians, and all kinds of other people. And I was like, "Wow, yes." When we think about atonement, only in terms of Jesus dying violently for us and that being like a gift that we should emulate in our own lives, possibly a little yucky. When we think about it as like a transaction or think about a courtroom metaphor, and all of these are stemming from biblical metaphors, usually from Paul. But the way you tell the story ends up being, and this is the feminist critique, potentially spiritually damaging to people who have experienced abuse, oppression, violence, people who just don't, they don't need to be told in a pastoral way, like lay down your life or go be a doormat. That's not addressing their problem at all. Maybe that's addressing the problem of an arrogant person. And a lot of people throughout the tradition would say, "Pride is the root of all sin. That's all of our besetting sin." But I'm like, "Eh, maybe if you can call self-deprecation the opposite to arrogance and also pride." But that's still kind of misleading because that's not how we think about those words. So anyway, I ended up writing about the biblical images and metaphors that Gregory of Nyssa uses to describe this lifelong process of spiritual transformation that is salvation, one step at a time. So that's very exciting, I think.

[Laughs] So now I'm in the process of turning that into a book.

B: Well, we're so excited. I can't wait to read it. And I'm so thankful for this conversation because I think this is probably the most in-depth we've explored your research. And I'm thrilled that you're looking at transformation, spiritual growth, contemplation.

These are eminently practical questions.

H: Oh, yeah. You know what else is really funny is that my work with the Jonathan Edwards Center here, it's a different book project where we're bringing to life a primary source for the first time, which is Jonathan Edwards' women relatives writings. So right now I've been going through Esther Hopkins Edwards' Diaries, and she's all concerned about Jonathan Edwards being this justification and then your saved end of story thing is like, "I'm not about that, Jonathan." So I'm like, "Esther, you would love Gregory of Nyssa and I love you." [laughs]

So there is a bit of a golden thread running through my various projects about women and theology that really intrigues me. But yeah.

B: I think that is probably the greatest area of overlap between the different but related work that we do, and that is that we're both, I think, really passionate about making connections. Yeah. And the world of theology is endlessly self-referential, and even things that don't seem to be connected. They often are. Yeah. And so I love using different sources throughout time that might be pointing sometimes with different language to the same reality, or sometimes maybe they're pointing to different realities, different truths, maybe there's disagreement, but understanding how things are connected is a great passion of mine as well. So I just love how practical this is, your work, because it seems to me that there is as much hunger for healing, for growth, for transformation. We have language for this now that's sort of out in the open.

Sometimes this conversation about transformation was language that would only happen in monasteries, would only happen in retreat centers, would only happen in some churches, not all churches. But these are conversations that are happening, it seems to me, in workplaces now, in secular culture, on street corners. People are hungering to come alive. They're hungering for healing. I think there's an awareness that how we are living, how sort of modern life is constructed is toxic for the human being, for the planet, for all of creation. I don't know, I hope I'm not being overly idealistic.

H: No, and I think that came into such sharp focus during the pandemic.

B: Yeah. The last thing I'll say about my great excitement for your work is the contemplative dimension that it would have been completely illogical for, I presume, someone like Gregory of Nyssa to do theology, to write theology without a vibrant prayer life. That the two would go hand in hand and in no way do I intend to throw any shade anywhere. However, what I would say is that we train theologians, we train lots of folks in theological disciplines in academic ways, and then we say the prayer side of things, it's up to you.

H: Oh, yeah. Those of us who have gone through long academic theology programs will often say this has been one of the hardest places to have a flourishing spiritual life because you have to play with ideas in such a way that you're separating yourself from them just a little bit in order to be able to analyze them and toss them around.

For me, Clare College Chapel was just incredible because we would have morning and evening

prayer, we would have an evensong. I had to be there. I was listening to the world-renowned Clare College Choir sing songs and stuff like that at the end of many of my days of theologizing.

This is actually one of the reasons I chose to go to Cambridge because I had read an interview with Sarah Coakley who was talking all about how prayer is essential to her theologizing. It also reminds me of Karl Barth saying, "theology in the second person." So you're talking to God the whole time you're doing your theology. But yeah, Gregory of Nyssa was a bishop and involved in some of the earliest ecumenical councils and that's the reason he was doing theology. Some of the texts I was using in my research were literally sermons, so they're for the spiritual life by design. At the same time that he was a bishop attending an early church council, his brother Basil had founded, I think, the first monastery ever at their villa that the family lived in. So that was the context for all of this thinking about God. I get it. It's very poetic. It's very humble in the sense that he really thinks we can't know that much about God and very worshipful. It's just beautiful.

B: I think what most inspires me about so many theologians, I had this experience reading Thomas Aquinas, certainly Barth, you're mentioning the Cappadocians.

When you give yourself to this vocation of thinking deeply, reflecting deeply on the nature of God, it's incredibly humbling. It is ironic that Christianity would develop in the last couple hundred years in such a muscular way, sometimes in such an aggressive way, hyperfueled by American colonial impulses.

H: And everything that Kristen Du Mez said in *Jesus and John Wayne*, book recommendation for you.

B: Yeah. So, so much of, it seems to me, the work of the theologian is just sort of grappling with how much can't be known. I mean, so much more can't be known than can be known and how daunting, that is.

H: Oh yeah. To have fear about preaching, right? Because you're like, "Well, I have to say something. But what the heck can I say?"

B: Yeah, that's just it. It's to stand squarely between those really extreme places that many days as a preacher, I feel like there's almost nothing I can say.

And on the other side, something must be said.

H: Right. Right.

B: There's so much urgent suffering in the world. The human heart is longing so desperately for peace to be known. The human heart longing to give itself away to something bigger, which ultimately is God. Right. It's just classic Augustine. Right. We're longing. We'll be restless until we can find ourselves in God. And so it's a beautiful and terrible vocation. You know, sometimes

I wonder if I'm a Debbie Downer within my class. Because a part of this is just saying, is just really describing just the challenge of it. And by the end of the semester, they also see the absolute sublime joy of it.

H: Yeah.

B: To be used as an instrument of God in some way, to have someone say, "What you shared really helps me, really changed me, really healed me, really helped to shine a light in a really dark place in my life." Gosh, there's no greater joy than that.

H: Hmm. So do you have a favorite theologian?

B: Oh my gosh. Do I have a favorite? I mean, I feel like there's this little cloud of witnesses, you know, like this little angelic team Brandon, these little voices that come to my aid.

Everything for me, it goes back to Aquinas, you know, as my Roman Catholic roots. You know, I had the real blessing of taking maybe four or five courses on Aquinas by people who had a great passion and love for scholastic theology. And at one point I thought I would go on to become a scholastic theologian. I think for me, Aquinas is sort of the basis for everything in that he was so generous and took people with whom he disagreed intensely with great seriousness and with great respect. And so for folks who might not, you know, have read a lot of Thomas Aquinas, you know, he spends pages upon pages really trying to understand and honor the arguments of folks that ultimately he doesn't in the end agree with. I would say Meister Eckhart has been a dear, dear influence, the possibility of really trusting the divine in dwelling that the Holy Spirit would in fact live inside of us as the Scriptures themselves proclaimed. You know, Thomas Merton has been a great guide for me in my life. St. Clare and St. Francis, their friendship and their work separately. I don't know if Cynthia Brogeau would consider herself a theologian. She's certainly a practical theologian, a person who of course is still around, an Episcopal priest, and has helped me form a really rich, nuanced framework around contemplative prayer, specifically centering prayer and Lectio Divina. Those are just some names coming to my mind. But do you have some others that you want to share too, Hannah?

H: Oh, I mean, like I sort of have to say Gregory of Nyssa, right? He's been my best friend for the last like five years. Listeners can't see, but I have a little crocheted Gregory of Nyssa right behind me on the bookshelf.

B: He's so cute and flawlessly executed on my back.

H: From my sister-in-law when I finished my master's.

B: I mean, as a crocheter from way back, I mean, there's a very high degree of artistry in this stuffy.

H: He's very cool. Gosh, but really, Irenaeus might be secretly my favorite, especially on the

apostolic preaching where he talks about recapitulation. Because I love that reading through the comedian is like a spiritual practice, not just kind of like reading information, which I mean, this makes sense. This is like another theme in my work is that salvation isn't just like thinking the right thing and then like, bam, you're safe.

Gosh, okay, so Irenaeus, Dante, John Donne, and George Herbert, let's call them theologians. And then, you know, my favorite living theologian is Kate Sonderegger.

B: Oh tell us.

H: I'm guessing many of our listeners will know exactly who she is because she is a professor at Virginia Theological Seminary. She is two out of, I think, three volumes through her systematic theology. The first one is the Doctrine of God, the second one is the Doctrine of the Trinity. And I was just talking to her at the American Academy of Religion Conference about volume three, which it seems like is going to talk a lot about sacrifice. So I'm very eager to get my hands on that and see what she has to say.

B: What are you reading these days?

H: Well, okay, I'm reading an advanced copy of a not yet published book called *You Are a Three*, which is about metaphors by Joy Clarkson. And the reason I have an advanced reader copy is because she will be joining us soon on *The Leader's Way*. But it's been great. I can't wait to have a conversation with her about it. It's really beautiful. Yeah. What are you reading?

B: Well, I am reading this really interesting book called *The Bible and the Believer*. And it's by Daniel Harrington, the Jesuit Scripture scholar Peter Enns and a Jewish Scripture scholar Mark Brettler. And the book explores the intersection between two different sorts of readings that we do as believers. On the one hand, holding a more scholarly, academic, historical, critical kind of reading, but also reading Scripture as a person of faith and how those two ways of reading can be woven together and how they mutually inform one another.

Because they've been invited to give a lecture by our dear former dean of Yale Divinity School, Harry Attridge. He's teaching a class on Catholics and the Bible, which sounds really fun. And he's invited me to give a lecture on the spirituality of Scripture in the Roman Catholic Church. And so I've been really curious about the--oh, here comes a dad pun--the origin of *Lectio Divina*.

H: Oh.

B: Did you see that one? See what I was doing there?

H: Wow.

B: So actually, I've been reading a bit of Origen, more Origen than I've read since seminary. And I am loving our beloved early Christian writer, Origen, who is sort of the godfather of a

scriptural interpretation, right? And so it's been great fun. Oh, that's really fun. That's really fun. So it's me as sort of a medievalist posing as an early Christian person. So I'm sure I'll have questions for you.

H: Oh, great. Cool. Bring them on.

B: Well, obviously, this podcast comes from New Haven, Connecticut, right? And gets beamed all over the world. And so I feel like this wouldn't be a complete conversation without some pizza recommendations.

H: I knew it. I knew that's what was coming.

B: Right?

H: Okay. You go first because my answer is off the wall. What's the best New Haven pizza?

B: So what people may not understand is that Connecticut—

H: That's true. This requires some context.

B: Connecticut is the pizza capital of the United States statewide. There are more pizza restaurants in Connecticut per capita than any other state in the country. And there was just a very big move in the legislature. I'm going to get political for a moment. And pizza, I believe the bill was passed to make pizza our state food here in Connecticut just last year. I think that happened. I want to believe that it happened.

H: Okay. Yeah.

B: And they make some pretty big claims about the superiority of its pizza.

H: And there is an absolute full-fledged pizza war in this city such that it's a completely normal get to know you question to be like, "What's your pizza? Which one's the best?" And people have strong feelings.

B: Very strong feelings. It does not need to be this confrontational. But there is a kind of traditional holy trinity here in New Haven, which is Pepes and Sally's and Modern. I don't know that I've had a piece of pizza from those places in like 20 years.

H: What?

B: I'm a little contrarian, Hannah. That's what the people need to know about me.

H: Wait, that's crazy.

B: Well, I am also probably twice your age, right? So it's not as crazy. You know, I mean, what my kids would say is that I'm a little special special.

H: Okay.

B: Right?

H: Translate.

B: Like, New Haven folks would say that having pizza at Pepe's, Sally's, or Modern would be like the most special pizza. But in the realm of special, it's not special enough. I have to have this special other pizza that I think is even better.

H: Sort of like a hipster?

B: Yeah, maybe. Yeah. I'm an only child.

H: Is it? No, there's an Enneagram type where this is the whole thing, isn't there? Is it a four?

B: It might be. Yeah, I think you're right. I don't know if it's four. I'm actually not that type, but I do every once in a while need to showcase my individuality and specialness.

H: Need to be special special.

B: And so my favorite pizza is Bar.

H: That's a great answer.

B: It's a great answer. It was the place where my wife and I went on one of our very first date. The first photograph of us taken together was at Bar. I don't even know that we would say we were dating at the moment. We were just friends having some pizza. So that's my answer.

What about you? Your answer might be, sounds like even more special special.

H: It's going to be more special special. No hate to Pepe's, Sally's, or Modern. I love them all. And every time we visit one, except for Pepe's to be honest, every time we visit Sally's and every time we visit Modern, we're like, no, no, this one's the best. No, no, this one's the best. But I want to know, do you get the mashed potato pizza at Bar?

B: I do. Yeah. Sorry. Thank you. I should have said that. So New Haven pizza to step back for a moment is thin. Thin. Thin. A nice char on the crust would make me very happy.

H: This is my problem with Pepe's is you get it and it's like black. Yeah. Like you're just eating carbon.

B: I get that. I get that. Yeah. So a Bar, a little less carbon, but mashed potatoes.

H: Yeah. Oh, it's so good. It's so good.

B: They make their own beer there. So there's a brewery. And so you can like do some serious carb loading between the pizza. Yeah. You don't need to eat for like a week.

H: They also have incredible cocktails at bar.

My answer is the new kid in town, Zeneli's. Now here's the deal with Zeneli's. It's across the street from Frank Pepe's and it's not New Haven style pizza. It's Neapolitan pizza. The family went to Naples, went to the pizza school in Naples, came back, made this Neapolitan style pizza restaurant. So it's like, it's like you're in Italy. It's a personal pizza. The dough is a little bit like soft. So good. The cheese is amazing. When you go to their website, it says, "Finally good pizza has come to New Haven." I mean, you have to... I would be, I would be afraid for my life if I set up an institution across from Pepe's and then said that publicly.

B: Oh, there needs to be a leader's way pilgrimage to Zeneli's. I think, right, a pizza pilgrimage.

H: Yes. Yes. All right, Brandon. So it's January 1st. Some might say the Christmas season is over. They're wrong. They're so wrong and they couldn't be wronger because as you and I know, and probably many of our listeners, there are 12 days of Christmas. So Merry Christmas. And also, is your nativity still up? Of course it's still up. Here's what I don't understand. I mean, popular culture gets so many things wrong. That's true. But why wouldn't they want more celebration?

H: I know. More Christmas.

B: A 12 day celebration.

H: Totally.

B: And baby Jesus is out. He's present. He is present.

H: He's present and accounted for.

B: I presume that everyone hides baby Jesus or doesn't put baby Jesus out throughout Advent, right? Often we forget where baby Jesus has been thrown.

H: I was about to ask if there's a special place because I would lose.

B: Yes, there's a very special place which we promptly forget about.

H: I've seen so many videos recently of dogs eating specifically the baby Jesus and it's tragic.

B: Oh, is there a special story around your nativity? Is there some sentiment about it?

H: Well, okay. It does. It comes back to dogs actually. Last year was our first real normal year that we weren't living internationally. We weren't planning on moving the next year, that kind of a thing. And I love nativity sets. This was my favorite part of preparing for Christmas every year growing up. It's like setting out the beautiful porcelain things and getting all the hay just right. So cute. So beautiful. Love it. Love it. So we're really starting off our life as a family. We need a baller nativity set. So I was like, well, we could go the porcelain Costco route.

B: That would not be a baller nativity set.

H: Right. Right. So I did like a deep dive research rabbit hole and decided that Fontanini was the nativity brand for me. So they're handmade in Italy, hand painted, and they look like porcelain, but they're not. They're not really breakable in the same way as porcelain. And they've got like a bajillion figures you can get. So last year we started off strong with the Holy Family and then my mom got us the Magi for Christmas. So now we have all of these guys. But then this year we were like, let's add a person every year. So we have a shepherd in transit coming to a nativity near you.

But last year when we got the Holy Family, so we could choose between a free goat to go with the Holy Family or a free dog to go with the Holy Family. And the thing is the dog looks exactly like our yellow lab Nellie. So last year it was Mary, Joseph, Jesus, and Nellie. And this year it's Mary, Joseph, Jesus, Magi, and Nellie. And then next year it'll be all these guys plus one shepherd.

B: I love that you chose the Italian nativity set. Well done.

H: I thought you'd like that. I was going to tell you actually when you're in Florence, you've got to like keep a lookout, see if there's like a Leader's Way, Fontanini person. ... A pilgrim!

B: A pilgrim. I'm wondering, do they have like the pizza maker in the nativity set?

H: [laughter] There is.

B: No, there's not really. Well, I mean, this is the beauty of St. Francis, right? He sort of invented the nativity. All of creation is there.

H: I do think of it with the Nellie dog. I'm like, it's like a Lectio Divina. Maybe the dog is imagining what it would be like to be there.

B: I feel like there needs to be some boundary though, you know, because if my wife saw, you know, the nativity with every conceivable, you know, the pizza maker and the golden retriever,

she'd want like a Dave Grohl statue. And I feel like that's where I draw the line. Dave Grohl was not at the birth of Jesus.

I have this little, it's in some ways very conventional. It's just the Holy Family. And we have several nativities, but my favorite is tiny. The Holy Family is maybe two or three inches tall and it's a Lenox set in pewter. I never would have purchased this for myself. It was really heavy, but my theater teacher from high school bought it for us as a wedding present. My theater teacher was just a dear, dear friend, a mentor, a graduate of, maybe not a graduate of Andover Newton, but studied at Andover Newton and really saw his work in teaching theater as a kind of ministry. And so we would talk about life and God and love. And so we became great friends after I graduated from high school. And so it's kind of conventional, but I love the connection to him. He died many years ago. And I love that it's small because I can put it right on the windowsill above my kitchen sink. I spend so much time there and it really helps me to stay focused and centered throughout the Advent and Christmas season. I love that. Shout out to Mr. Hoffman.

H: Well, yeah, and I have to do a little shout out too, because I think we currently have two nativities, if not three. But the second one is really special to me because it's a gift from my friend Hannah Fytche. Shout out to Hannah Fytche.

B: Hannah. So I love this. You can never have enough.

H: Yeah, I know.

Do you have favorite podcasts?

B: So I have been listening to a lot of knitting and fiber podcasts these days.

H: Love it.

B: I am obsessed with knitting. I am a new knitter and an old crocheter. So I think I've been crocheting for, is it possible, over 30 years, Hannah? That doesn't seem possible. So I've started knitting and I'm loving it. So I want to shout out to Taylor Earle at the Wool Needles Hands podcast, my absolute favorite knitting podcast. She's fun and funny and informative and a great place to go if you just sort of want to dive into the world of knitting in particular, but fiber arts in general.

H: Wow. Okay, I'm pulling up my podcast app. My absolute favorite, which is pretty on brand, is The Happiest Podcast on Earth, which is all about Disney World. And really though, and this is the beauty of podcasts, even Griffin listens to this with me now because it's like they're our friends.

B: Yes, right?

H: Mm hmm. Yeah. And then like a little more Leader's Way on brand ... that half of my personal brand ... I hate that I started saying this now, I have to keep saying "my brand," like I

have one. I love Crackers and Grape Juice, it's like a theology one. Love love. And Also With You, which is two Episcopal priests. It's so fun to listen to. And then of course, we have to give a shout out to some of our like partner pods, like Chapter, Verse, and Season and For the Life of the World. This is like a podcasting hotspot. Everybody here at Yale Divinity School has a podcast.

B: It does seem that way, which is cool.

H: Yeah. Mm hmm.

B: I'll also give a shout out. I don't listen to a ton of podcasts, but I love the We Can Do Hard Things podcast with Glennon Doyle. Mm hmm. I always learn something and it helps me to stay connected to the community of folks who may be spiritual, but not religious, just to make sure I'm not in a little sort of Christian theological echo chamber, which is my happy, comfortable place. I love my peeps there. Yeah. But that crowd, Glennon and the folks that she has on remind me that there are some wonderful brilliant, thoughtful people committed to spiritual growth who may not be in the traditional religious path. So that's a cool one.

H: That also reminds me, we both love On Being, obviously.

B: Oh, obviously. Thank you for saying it. You know, I just assume that everyone knows about On Being and our wonderful YDS graduate, Krista Tippett, who, I mean, feels like the OG podcast in some ways.

H: Right? The archetype of a podcast.

B: I just, I want Krista Tippett to ask me questions and I want to record it for my kids.

H: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Yeah.

B: Wouldn't that be fun? I feel like we've had such a fun conversation. How about we end with a favorite place to pray?

H: Oh, that's a good one. You know, while I was at Clear College Chapel, that was definitely it. You know, it's hard to beat a Cambridge College Chapel. That and so many other of my regular places of worship throughout my life have been favorites and for good reason. But I always think back to the T.S. Eliot quote about how it is to "kneel in a place where prayer has been valid." I think that's from the final quartet of the Four Quartets. So good. And sometimes you do just have an ability to lean into prayer in a place where you know people have prayed before and kind of the spirit of that can carry you on your weary days.

Another favorite place though, and I think my favorite place in Connecticut to pray is in nature. And I feel very connected to God when I'm like among trees and things like that. So I'm a big hiker.

B: Oh my gosh. I mean, being out in nature is like medicine for me. I never don't feel better, more connected to God, to myself. Yeah. I'm thinking for me, any empty church that's silent is a favorite place of mine. I was the church janitor when I was in high school and it was there in the silence of that sacred space that I think I discovered my vocation. I felt a deep longing for God and felt at home in the silence. Gosh, I couldn't have imagined how much noisier our world would get from those days in the late 80s, early 90s, but silence is for me my primary spiritual practice. So empty churches, walks around the neighborhood. I'm a big, big walker. When I lived in Rome, I was exposed to this beautiful cultural practice of the *passaggiata*, which is just the evening stroll, which I love to do with my family members, but often on my own. And it's a kind of prayer practice and an hour walk, especially in the warmer months at night after dinner. So I'm often, I'm doing sometimes walking meditation or sometimes I'm literally talking to God. I can only imagine what my neighbors think. I mean, it's like a very populated space. There's that guy again talking to himself.

And then there's this one particular spot that was just so healing for me in my college days at Notre Dame. There's of course this great, beautiful basilica of the sacred heart that's in the center of campus, but there's this lesser-known space, which is the crypt chapel underneath the basilica, which is in some ways aesthetically completely unremarkable. But there's this little tabernacle in this little quiet place and it had the most comfortable kneeler on the planet.

I mean, someone really thought about ergonomics and I've never seen one of its kind anywhere else and it's still there. And so every so often when I find myself in South Bend, Indiana for the sacred pilgrimage of a Notre Dame football game, I go in on, you know, there's a hundred thousand people everywhere and no one in this little crypt chapel at the kneeler. I'm like, you're missing out. That's my place. Yeah, it's my place to pray.

H: I love that it's like the opposite of so much that's written about prayer practice. Like, especially you have these medievalists being like, now do the camel pose where it's just like your elbows and your knees on the floor for maximum pain. Penitence, penitence.

B: Give me that kneeler.

H: Oh my gosh.

B: Well, I mean, this was fun. Anytime you can talk about theology and Doritos and dogs and nativities, you know, we will have either gained some new listeners or just estranged most.

H: Yeah, Australia will just fall off the map.

B: Australia no longer.

H: But really to all our listeners, please be in touch. Slide into those Berkeley at Yale DMs. There are a lot of y'all listening to this thing and I have no idea who you are. Brandon and I have

talked before about how we are basically golden retrievers. I want to smile at you. I want to say hi. I want to be friends right back, but I don't know who you are.

B: Yes. Yeah. Send us pictures of you listening to the podcast. Yeah, we want to get to know you and hang out with us. You know, the beauty of our work is that we are a great way to study at Yale, right? You don't have to apply and be accepted. We have, gosh, between 10 and 15 online courses and workshops every year. So you can come on, hang out with us, deepen your faith, deepen your leadership skills, develop some friendships and get the kind of support from other folks in ministry that's desperately needed. There's so much isolation in church leadership right now. We need one another more than ever. The world needs the church more than ever, needs spiritual community. And so come and hang out with us and let's support one another in all this important work that we're doing.

H: I love that. I also, Brandon, have just these podcast stickers with our beautiful leader's way shell burning a hole in my pocket. So if you're out there listening, you've listened to one or two or 10 episodes, leave a review and I will personally mail you a leader's way podcast sticker. I don't care if you're like Hannah, your voice is annoying. Hannah, your hot takes are dumb. I will send you a sticker.

B: Oh my gosh.

Thanks y'all for listening.

H: Thank you for listening.

Hannah and Brandon: Thank you for listening to The Leader's Way. We hope you were encouraged and inspired. To learn more about this episode, visit our website at berkeleydivinity.yale.edu/podcast.

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