

[MUSIC]

Winnie Varghese (W): The one thing I would say is I don't think a church can be any happier than its leader. Joy in ministry. I think if we don't have it, we should interrogate them.

[MUSIC]

Brandon Nappi (B) & Hannah Black (H): Hi, I'm Brandon Nappi. Hi, I'm Hannah Black. 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: Hey, Hannah.

H: Hey, Brandon.

B: I'm excited for this conversation with Winnie Varghese, and I'll tell you why.

H: [LAUGHTER]

B: There is so much hand-wringing and so much pessimism around church life and around shrinking parish communities.

H: Yeah.

B: This is a leader who I want to be my rector and my pastor. I was just reminded that there's another reality out there than some of the stories that we typically tell ourselves. That is so true.

H: I also think there might be something a little bit magical about Atlanta, Georgia because our last guest, the Reverend Dr. Gabrielle Thomas, and this guest are both at St. Luke's Atlanta, which we didn't do on purpose at all, but I'd like to book a vacation now just to go to church there.

B: [LAUGHTER] Is that an Atlanta pilgrimage? Yeah. We must plan. No, for sure.

I think-- was this Brene Brown? I might be wrong. When in doubt, I always just assume that whatever brilliance I'm about to repeat is Brene Brown's. But I think she talked about all of us being bigger than one story, that we tell about ourselves. Bigger than the one story we tell about other people. And I think it's also really true of parish communities, church communities. And I think what I find really cool about Winnie Varghese is that she's a truth teller. She's not afraid to say that she doesn't have all the answers. She's equal parts brilliant and funny and really pastoral and warm and then prophetic and challenging. And so in the constellation of skills for pastoral ministry, she lights up so many different stars. So it was really cool to have this conversation with her.

H: Yeah. And I mean, we're at a seminary where we are training people to become people who are called leaders in their communities, in their parishes. And so there's kind of two aspects, I think, to leadership. There is being in a position in which you are a leader in an organizational kind of a way. And then there's really inhabiting that leadership and being a leader in your leadership position.

B: Indeed, indeed.

H: And Winnie is all of those things.

B: Oh, yes.

H: So let me tell you a little bit about the Reverend Winnie Varghese, if you don't know her ministry. So she's a national leader in the Episcopal Church. She's a priest known for her writing, her teaching, her preaching before becoming the 23rd rector of St. Luke's in Atlanta. She served as the priest for ministry and program coordination at Trinity Wall Street in New York City. She was the rector and priest in charge at St. Mark's in the Bowery in the city. She was also chaplain at Columbia and at UCLA. She's from Dallas. And she serves on the board of trustees at Union Theological Seminary. She's published. And I think a really important part of her story as well is that her parents came to this country from India. And she spent the early part of her childhood days there. She was ordained to the diaconate in 1999 and to the priesthood in the year 2000. So I'm really excited to share this conversation. And I hope folks are as edified and inspired as I was.

H: I will just say for our listeners who are missing out, I get to see not only Winnie, but her dog Stella, who is joining us.

B: Thank you so much, Winnie, for being with us. We're so excited. And we have one question that we really love to ask some of our friends who come on the podcast. And that is, can you share your earliest encounter with God with us?

W: Sure. So my parents were both from India. And my father came with the United States in 1970. My mom in 1971. They were already married. I was born in 1972. And I was born two months early. And my mom-- I don't think she had 100 pounds when she was pregnant with me. She's just a small person. And all that comes out of the end of the colonial era and lack of food in India because of the war and all the politics kind of landing on these bodies. I mean, I wouldn't have survived if I had been born in India, in my mother's body, no way, or unlikely. And so my mother's story is that she's in Dallas in the hospital. And she remembers coming to a little bit. My dad's doing his work for school. And hearing the doctor say, it would be very unlikely if she survives the night. But if she does, she has a 50% chance of making it. And my mother saying that she said a prayer offered me to Mary and had a sense that it was going to be fine. And then she remembers the nurse coming in to fill out a birth certificate because you need a birth certificate for a death certificate.

And she remembers listening to this. And she felt like she was levitating because they had given her so much medicine because she was so small, it was too much medicine. So she wasn't coming out of it. It's also the 70s. And she had a horrible C-section. So she's not got enough blood. All this is happening. And them asking for a name so that they can have a name potentially for a death certificate. And they weren't ready because in India, I'm the first daughter. So the first daughter has the father's mother's Christian name. And then you get your father's name, then his father's name. And a lot of societies are like that. And then you get your house name is your family's name. But there's something you're called at home, which is what she was asking for. What do we call you? They just hadn't talked about it. They had two months.

And so my mother said-- she literally thought, how do you say in English that we want her to win? What's the word in English for that? My mother said she tried to ask her to call me Wynn. This nurse was sassy. Said, that's not a name. The nurse said Winnie was a name. So my mother is convinced this baby will survive. The name matters. And then they took me to India before I was a year old because they couldn't figure out how to deal with all the parts as young people. And my father said, take her to Manargat Church because I have given her to Mary. Because that's why we have her. And my father is trying very hard to be a good Protestant, goes to India, goes to his mother's house, says, can you look after her? We have to finish up school, whatever else will come back. And my grandfather says, no, that's actually not what we're going to do because I've raised you all. I'm not raising more children. And so my father's tail between his legs goes to my mother's family's house and says, this is what's just happened? And my mother's mother's like, of course. Everybody comes today, which is exactly what she's like.

And so my father then goes to St. Mary's Church in Manargat, which is my mother's family's church, and offers the baby, which his mother would have hated if she had known she would be so Protestant. And my whole life, that's exactly my living, is I am a father's child. I'm like those people. I think like them. I look like them, love them. And I was given to Mary in the lineage of my mother's family. It's a Syrian cathedral. It tells an ancient story of presence of St. Thomas and the St. Thomas community. And Mary fits within the goddess profile of how the approach to the deity has worked in Kerala. There's a whole goddess tradition. And I have to tell you, again, I went to Union. I am a Protestant thinking. And even high church Anglicanism, I think, is very Protestant, frankly. But my connection to God comes from Manargat Church.

H: So what's your relationship with Mary now? Yeah, she's my person. I've tried to do some scholarship and some research over the years in this area. And partly what I find is there isn't much, is there? It's overwhelmingly Orthodox and Catholic women talking about the encounter that women have had with Mary. There's some theology. There's some things in the text. But I mean, it's so clear, I think, that Mary has taken the place of the goddess in our tradition and has that power. And I think because that's so outside our capacity to think as Christians within our Christian frameworks that we really haven't done a lot of work in that area. But I feel a lot of

curiosity, a lot of connection. And I feel like it's just an unexplored part of our tradition.

And I've even tried to write on it. And I find myself, I can sort of think about it sociologically. I can sort of think about it phenomenologically or the practices in Kerala. And so I've tried to investigate that a little bit. And I keep getting a little stuck, because it is processions, it's connections to old, old stories of other goddesses. And they're all very much like Mary. Part of why it worked in Kerala is that almost all the goddess traditions are there are many, many particular names of goddesses. Basically, they're human people who were just done wrong. And in their rage, they become the deity. And so all the appeasing of the deity and all the beautiful ritual around it is, oh, she's mad. And we get a day once a year or twice a year to try to make her happy. And if we make her happy, she might give us something we need. It's some version of that. Partly, I think, what they're saying is something profoundly sacred breaks in. And it's very disruptive of the order of the place. So caste is inverted, which is the most visible thing in India, radically inverted. And it's wild. It's very embodied. And it feels really human. And I think as a priest, almost frightening. It's a place you're not supposed to go. And not because it feels evil to me. It feels wild. And we're so contained. The liturgy is to try to grab at the holy and keep it in our box. And I'm for it. I'm scared of it, too. Because to me, it's real. So why don't we channel that, right?

B: Well, what's coming to mind for me is Mary at the foot of the cross bearing witness when so many of the disciples had laughed for fear of being associated with Jesus of likewise being crucified. And the courage, the commitment to bearing witness to the pain, the violence, the horror. And I don't know. Is there some connection there to parish priesthood? The willingness to stand with, the willingness to give voice to, to see the injustice in our community, the kind of things that many will run away from. I wonder, is there a connection there or not? I don't want to put theology in your mouth and in your heart. But that's what's coming up for me.

W: Yeah, and as you know, that is a lot of how Mary is written about, right? Mary is the first priest. She is the one, the first that can say, this is my body, my blood, literally. She may be the only one that can actually say that.

And that that's defining of priesthood in our tradition, right? That that's the thing you can do. A lot of the theology around Mary is always in deep solidarity with the suffering of the world. And that's what the church is for, right? I mean, of course, we've got buildings to maintain in budget. There's all this stuff that we do. But the witness we bear, the witness our community, I think, are called to bear is that really profound solidarity, that we're not afraid of the human condition, that actually we want to know it. Jesus guides us to it and says this is where we will know what it means to live. And Mary points us directly to that. And I think if we do our Mariology right, it's the thing that keeps us away from an overly abstract Christianity and a Christianity of power. Now, if we do it wrong, she's like a maidservant of the king, right? The mother of the empire. But I think when we get that right, and I think it always kind of guides us back to that. I'm wanting to ask you, I've been thinking about all week.

B: And of course, anyone who's listening to this podcast is aware of the declining numbers of

folks attending church regularly on Sundays. And there is something about parish life that has captivated you clearly, that is so valuable and transformational. And so at a moment when so many folks are voting with their feet and leaving, you've made this incredibly powerful commitment in what happens in a parish, in a church community. And I wonder if you can speak a little bit about that because I think this is confounding and bewildering to a lot of folks.

W: Yeah, for me, what a parish is, it's a way to root deeply in a place. And so in some ways, I'm kind of true to my immigrant heritage in that I keep bopping around to different places. But I think also it was part of the immigrant urge to like, what would it mean to belong somewhere? Really, a church gets to be a place where you can, you can actually join this. It has a footprint in a place, like it literally is on a piece of land, and there's a heritage and history to that, and there's a community of history.

And I was ordained in 2000, the church had been radically declining for 30 years when I was ordained. But truthfully, and I think this is true for most of us that are ordained, I had never been a part of a church that was declining. I had always been in churches that were just thriving in different scales, different sizes, real kind of do-it-yourself church. I was never a part of a really, really big church growing up. And I have to be really honest, I didn't really like church growing up, but it was a thing that was alive that you could make, that was in a place. And I've tried other things that are not as rooted in parish, and it's true, I don't like it. This is the thing I was made to do.

And I don't know that there's any silver bullet. Some people will say, "If we were more committed to social justice, we'd be fine. If we served better, we'd be fine. If we were more honest, we'd be fine." I don't think that's true. I think that when people struggle with finding what is sacred in their living, there's something going on in the society, and there is. We are absolutely contesting what it means to belong, what is holy and of value, and we're upsetting what has been decided was not of value. So of course, we would struggle institutionally. But I don't think it's because Christians are stupid, that it's not working. And I don't think that it's a one piece. There're some big questions around us right now. And when church speaks to the questions of our living, it's compelling.

And there are all kinds of ways to do it from different political views. The leaders get put in a dilemma where you can't, because we haven't decided. And if you're not a leader that is willing to stand in those questions and has the capacity to guide a community through those kinds of questions, of course the place can't flourish. And again, I don't want to say that that's simple. I think it's extraordinarily complicated, or we'd be fine right now. Like we're questioning everything as we should. It's like the Mary at the foot of the cross thing. It's the most interesting thing.

B: I think you have a front row seat.

W: It's fascinating.

H: Yeah. One of the things that I can't help but think about in all these conversations so many of

us are having about declining church attendance is that I have so many friends from my childhood and my young adulthood and family members who are really committed and deeply spiritual Christians, but especially after the pandemic, there might be some politics to sprinkle in there. Many of the people I know have just stopped going to a church, even though that hasn't felt like a spiritual decision for them. Is that something that you've seen? How do you make sense of that?

W: Yeah. We're doing the preparation for a funeral today with a brother and sister and they're older and her husband has died and her brothers come to help with this funeral. And basically they said that. Like we didn't ever intend to stop going. We just don't go. They have an amazing Salvation Army activist background of service and missionary work in their families and among them, the people were talking and they just stopped.

Again, I don't think there are easy answers to that. In the culture, we haven't lost our capacity to be religious in the way sometimes that it's reported. I think people are deeply religious and spiritual and how we're ordering our lives just got flipped on its head, how we use our time. I love to travel or I used to, I don't anymore. I don't wanna leave home. And I feel very in touch with like tiredness and then a lot of us have been really reoriented to our bodies and to our personalities and our inner lives and our fears.

And so one of the ways we're trying to think about that in this parish is we just talk about it a lot. It was not the same people we were. And so we're not trying to recreate the lives we used to have. There was a lot that we learned about ourselves. So that's good.

H: Has your experience of parish ministry changed then?

W: Yeah, absolutely. Kind of the big ones are people think they wanna do more but everyone's doing less. And so we've got to talk that through. I feel like I lost a lot of spine and filter. Like I feel like I feel everything. I am just in touch with my feelings all the time.

H: A really good commercial could do it.

W: Right, all the feelings. And church is a lot to feel, like it's a lot. And you feel it when you stand in the room like people bring their grief to the room and their expectations or anxieties. And so we're just different. And so we're spending time on trauma. This is the kind of church that has celebrities come in at 10 o'clock and talk for 30 minutes. It's just me talking about belonging for the next couple of months. And then we're gonna talk about our desires and yearning. And we're gonna talk about addiction and substance abuse and use. We're just gonna talk about as many of the real things as we can think of, because we're all living in it right now.

The task is to stay really present to who we've become. And my experience is I keep doing things that feel a little bit light or they're not clever enough or smart enough or deep enough. And the room is packed and everyone's in it. I think it's a very Episcopal problem of just being clever, like we're a little bit world weary. None of us are world weary right now, we're hurting.

We're pretty like connected to it, right?

H: That's the layer beneath the cynicism, I think.

W: Totally, no, totally.

B: Yeah, and I've heard this from nonprofit leaders whose work has traditionally really relied upon, if not weekly, like regular attendance.

Volunteers coming together regularly to accomplish a mission. And they were telling me that they've been struggling in the same way, just getting folks to make consistent regular appearances. And so while I think there's some unique challenges that the church faces, I think to your point, we've all lived through this globally traumatic moment. We're still processing it. And what does it mean as a leader of a community to be leading when folks might come once a month, once a quarter, they might watch you preach or participate in a service online, maybe go to three or four other churches or maybe listen to a TikTok or motivational survey. So the buffet table was actually much broader now, realizing that we can connect with any spiritual community in the world now. And I just wonder, how do you make sense of that as a leader? Because before you knew who your people were, they were in front of you. And now, it's a kind of diaspora moment, they're scattered around.

W: Yeah, it was just totally my lane, like I'm for it. I love that. The other side of a lot of that for me is, this same capacity for that kind of global connection means I get to know my cousins in a way that I'd have to do so much more and could not have that kind of regular relationship. So I'm kind of for it. I love all the remote and distant. But when I was in New York during the beginning of the pandemic, I was on a clergy team where there's a ton of us. So unless we were on, we weren't supposed to go to church to keep it safe.

So I started with sitting in front of my computer on Sunday morning when I wasn't on and watching. And then it moved to my phone and I put my headphones on. And then I put it in my pocket and vacuumed while I did it. And by the second time, I started to watch other people to see how they were doing. And then there's some I really liked and I would watch, they were in my phone and I found it all really enriching, frankly, and there's one or two of those that I still, like every once in a while, will go see what they're up to because I learned so much from what they were doing.

So I'm just for it. We had the conversation a couple of times, so should we just put down our live stream or some of the live streams and try to encourage people to get back in the room? And I feel very mindful of those who cannot be in the room, in our city at least, specifically in the black community that people haven't come back together, specifically because of how people are sick in the Black community, right? And access to healthcare, all kinds of other things. And so it's a very particular message to say, we don't need to be online anymore. And then the number of people that work so hard to get to church and it's not safe, they're not really steady on their feet. They'll send me a note feeling very guilty about having, you know, if you're in the church of the

Holy Comforter, I'm like, thank God that you are in the Holy Comforter and not hobbling across the parking lot where you're gonna break your hip. There's, I think a lot of strength and good things have come out of this.

The orientation I've had to shift for myself in the last couple of years is it used to be, yes, I need to bring people in this room because in this room, they form community in a particular way which means we have ministry in a particular way. And so now I feel like what I'm trying to do is I'm trying to communicate this place, the needs of this place. And I mean, literally the land that we're on, the community and city around us, like I am making place online and in person. So part of that is, and it always like every week someone comes in and says, oh, it's so good to be back here. I'd forgotten what this feels like. Who would say there are long time members of this church and just haven't been in here for five years. So that's happening for us. People are coming back and there's that particular connection that comes in the place.

And that I think challenges those of us that are, you know, come from the time of, oh, these buildings are what are holding us back. That's what gathers the community. It's the walls, it's the windows, like it's the place, right? Which is profound, like they remember being in this place before. And then it's also my, I think as the leader, my capacity to think creatively about what it means that we're in this place and in this, on this place on the planet in this time to create identity attached to being here at St. Luke's in Atlanta. And I've always cared about that. So at St. Mark's in the Bowery, and we would talk a lot about the spirituality of the Americas, because it was the oldest site of continuous Christian worship in New York. So this, you know, like what is, who is Mary of the Americas? Like what, you know, what is the story of the Lenape and of the Stuyvesant's and of the British and the Dutch and you know, like who were we on this piece of land? I think for people like me that in a lot of Americans, right? They don't have a place. Like we had a house in the suburbs, right? We don't have a place. Church becomes one of the places that makes place for us. And I wonder if we've undersold that idea for so long because of the expensive buildings, that it's an opportunity to reclaim them, right? As a place that has gardens and as a place that locates us in history, and has a heritage we've got to deal with, but also as a place that you might come to.

H: It just occurred to me that as you've been talking about community, I'm thinking, of course, I understand church community. I've been a lay person in churches and I understand how that works, but how does that work as the leader of a church? Leadership positions are often so lonely. How do you be in community with your parishioners, but also be a leader?

W: There are tons of boundaries involved. And I've just lived like that my whole life. I'm 51, right? Starting to think about the thing you've done for 25 years and what are the odd things you've done. And for me, a little bit of that is, oh, right. I've lived a life where I've assumed that I'm in public for 25 years. That people can see me and will see me, not me, but see the rector of their church.

And so I live my life as though I will be seen in public, which I have to say, if you had talked to me about in my 20s, I think I would have thought, how inauthentic or how weird. Now I think,

actually, guardrails around who you are in public are really smart. It's a really wise way to be, assuming that people assume that you're gonna be compassionate and kind and appropriate and listening, right? All those things and not drinking excessively and not shouting at people, whatever all the things are, right?

H: Yeah.

W: Really pretty great things to not do because you think people are watching. Like life is kind of better if you think about.

So there's that part, which has made me a better person than I would have been otherwise. And then there are real boundaries in this community, which also, a lot of effective communication in relationship is actually about boundaries and knowing yourself. So the institution is kind of forced this learning for me because even in your personal relationships, you're not just supposed to spew all the time, right? Like you acknowledge another person who has needs of you. And so you, like your boundary in certain ways. So I feel like all that has been for me, kind of a covert way of learning how to be a better human being. So I'm appreciative of it.

And then I think as a leader in a community, one of the things I've looked for in communities whereas I've just heard where I should be, if they're questioned, you'll like my questions. And if they're not, we'll both be unhappy. If I am really curious about how physical development on this site here at St. Luke's impacts the future of the city of Atlanta, and they are not, and they are concerned about whatever, we're just gonna be unhappy.

But even if I'm curious about who America is trying to be, and so shocking that I find myself drawn very much inexplicably to a community in the middle of Atlanta, which kind of holds the heart of our democracy in its hands right now in this state, in the middle of downtown, in a community trying to figure out how they wanna be present. So like this theoretical question I'm very intrigued by is manifest in this place. And so even where there's conflict in this place, it's about the things that are the conflicts that this nation is trying to sort out right now. And we get to do it interpersonally.

So I think your questions have to be the same. And it's not who I wish I was, but who I actually am, which as being a leader, I think is something we've gotta be attentive to.

B: And it occurs to me that without boundaries, there really could be no love. It's in fact precisely because you're a boundary person in your leadership role, you're a rector, you're a priest, you actually get invited into some really intimate spaces with people, life, death, baptisms, marriages, literally walking with people at their last breaths, right? So by creating a little bit of boundary, you get the ultimate access to these great mysteries of life, the joys, the sorrows of everything in between. And what an amazing calling in the stories that you must be privy to, just must defy language.

W: I'm sure as you've heard others say, it's a huge privilege. Like there's no getting away from it

of what people will share because it's not just your capacity to make a relationship, it's the institutional identity that you've been handed. So it's this enormous privilege, but then I think that the responsibility of that privilege is to give others that perspective, right? And I think it's a dilemma of the church sometimes is how do we stay tender and personal and moving, right? Emotional, connected with also this perspective of the world we live in that we should care about, that we must care about. And like we have an endowment that has to make its money and we have sidewalk to clean and we've got a staff to run who have all the same regular challenges of any other workplace.

It's a funny juggle of all those things, but the heart of it is we literally get invited into the entire scope of human experience every week almost, at least definitely every month. Someone gets a crazy diagnosis and someone has the great celebration and the great opportunity and a baby's born, you know, and you walk someone through to their death and that young person never wants to see their parent again. And that person's brain injury will never be healed and mental illness does this and this person's unhoused. If I thought I had to do something, which I often do about any of it, you're incapacitated. But if I'm supposed to bear witness and I'm supposed to bring this perspective into a pulpit, again, it's such a beautiful way to live. And up against this story of promise that's so profound.

H: You've used the word happy a couple of times to talk about the serendipity of questions aligning or your own experience of ministry and the litany of things you just described that you experience on a day-to-day life. Make me feel like how do you be happy and experience all of that?

W: You know, the one thing I would say is I don't think a church can be any happier than its leader.

Joy in ministry, I think if we don't have it, we should interrogate that. You know, the Buddhists get this concept down better than us of illusion. The truth is our person has a brain injury. That's the truth. My illusion is I wanna help, I wanna fix it. Her life should be different. It should be better. How horrible did that accident happen? That's the illusion. Like none of that's real, right? It's my anxiety. The truth is she has a brain injury. So how do we walk with her? I can even feel it in my voice. Like the stillness of that is so different. And it feels like what a privilege to get to know someone and to know her struggle. And it just feels devastating. It's a person about my age who just had a horrible accident. She knows there's something missing. You can see it. And I so overly identify with that. And she will inappropriately say whatever. And almost every time, oh my God, she's just said what we're all thinking. She's just sounded inappropriately, our despair in this moment. She just did it. Yes, what I just said is horrible. But again, like what a beautiful way to live. If we don't need her for anything, I don't need her to be different. If we can do this in a way where I don't need her to be different than she is and we know our boundaries, like we gotta get the class done or the service done, right? We gotta, I'm not gonna embarrass her. I'm not gonna idealize her.

But yeah, this isn't gonna be as cut and dry as other more civilized rooms probably will be. And what a powerful thing to have the spirit just speak in the room. So I feel like it's sometimes it's, I'm telling you, and I prefer good order. I think that is one of my, I controlled the thing I'm supposed to control. We're having the good outcome. We did the effective event. The people are here. The food is good.

H: Yeah, it makes me comfy.

W: Yeah, I totally, that's the right way to do things. And then mostly I think in church, like you do all that, that is our job. We wanna do that well. And then the spirit's gonna come and it's beautiful.

B: Reverend Winnie, I am so thankful for this conversation. It's been rich, unplanned, and I just wanna continue the conversation.

H: Thank you so much for being with us. I know our listeners will really benefit from your wisdom and your honesty, and this has been amazing.

W: Thank you so much. And how strange to have a conversation where I don't get to ask you a bunch of questions. I have a lot of them.

(upbeat music)

B&H: 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. Rate and review us and follow the podcast to make sure you never miss an episode. Follow @berkeleyatyale on Instagram for quotes from the podcast and more. Until next time. The Lord be with you.