

Sacred Stories and Listening

Alli: Hi, I'm Alli.

Karen: ... and I'm Karen.

Alli: This is Coffee Hour at the Commons. Good afternoon, Karen.

Karen: Hi, Alli.

Alli: How are you doing today?

Karen: I'm great.

Alli: Yeah?

Karen: Yeah.

Alli: We have a special guest with us today.

Karen: We do. We have the Reverend Jane Hale with us and she has at least two jobs. She is the missional priest in charge at Trinity in Brooklyn, which is one of the oldest church buildings we have in the state, and she is the tri-town missional curate. We'll have to ask her what that means because I have no idea right now.

Alli: Welcome.

Jane Hale: Thanks. It's really fun to be here. Thanks for asking me.

Karen: Let's get started. You are a priest in the Episcopal church and you have not been ordained that long. Can you tell us about that? Where are you from?

Jane Hale: Sure. I was ordained to the transitional diaconate in June of 2017, nope, 16. Sorry.

Karen: 16, all right.

Jane Hale: See, time flies when you're having fun, and started as the transitional deacon at Trinity in Brooklyn, and was ordained to the priesthood in December of 2016 and began what's called my missional curacy shortly thereafter.

Karen: Are you from the northeast part of Connecticut?

Jane Hale: I am. I live in Pomfret.

Karen: Okay. All right.

Jane Hale: I get to work in my neighborhood, which is really wonderful.

Karen: You're familiar with the churches there?

Jane Hale: I am. Yeah.

Karen: These are two distinct jobs that you have, this missional priest in charge at Trinity in Brooklyn and missional curate. I don't know what a missional curate does.

Jane Hale: Sure. Yeah, they are-

Karen: What are those two jobs?

Jane Hale: They are distinct jobs that are definitely really closely connected. Being a missional priest in charge, I am part-time. I'm the part-time priest at Trinity in Brooklyn, which is a real gift. It's a great congregation full of really faithful folks that are ... There's a lot of energy. It's a growing congregation, and it's a lot of fun to be with those people and worship with those folks and try new things on in our community.

Jane Hale: The missional curacy is something that's kind of new and it is ... I work with not only the folks at Trinity Brooklyn, but also the parish of St. Alban's in Danielson and the parish of St. Philip's in Putnam. Those are two adjoining towns that sort of make up a larger cohesive community in northeast Connecticut. That's great. I spend time not only working with those congregations, but I also work in the towns, on the streets, in the coffee shops, basically practicing listening for what God is up to in those particular neighborhoods and how God's work that's ... what God is doing out in the community that we may not see if we keep ourselves boxed up in our church buildings. We're trying to pay attention to all that's going on because God ... We know from scripture and also from personal experience that God is about reconciling and restoring and healing. If we pay attention, if we go out and intentionally pay attention, we'll notice where that's happening and we'll notice that story that's still unfolding all around us, which is really a beautiful thing.

Jane Hale: The missional curacy is a little bit about that. I've met so many really amazing people, heard all kinds of stories from what lights people up and gets their heart going, what brings people joy, where people are struggling, where whole communities are wrestling with certain issues, you name it. I never know who I'm going to encounter and what story I'm going to get, but the beautiful thing is the Holy Spirit always shows up. I always learn something from whoever it is I've encountered and I'm talking to. That helps to kind of knit together a much more cohesive picture of the tapestry that is that community and how God's weaving that together in a way that I wouldn't be able to do with just my own perspective.

Jane Hale: There's that piece, and then I'm also working with a group of folks from each of the three parishes out in the community to do that work together. We have started a community of practice where we come together to listen for God in scripture through a practice that many of us in the Episcopal church in Connecticut are familiar with, which

is dwelling in the word, which has been incredibly transformative for, I think, members of all three parishes.

Karen: Oh, yeah.

Jane Hale: A new way of listening to scripture, not for what's right or wrong with our heads, but more of how God is tugging on our hearts. It's really practicing listening to what God is up to with an open heart and paying attention to deeper connections that we may have with stories that are unfolding in front of us and where those connections are with our own stories.

Jane Hale: We use that same exact practice out in the community actually. We do that with each other's stories. We practice listening with an open heart to somebody else's story and make connections to where God is active in our own lives and in the lives of others. We're also using that same practice to go out into the community and to, I'm putting air quotes around this, but read the community in the same way that we read scripture. It's paying attention with an open heart, noticing whatever it is that God wants to show us. The beautiful thing about doing that with a community that is regularly doing this, practicing this, it's a sacred practice of listening, is that we come back together and we can reflect from all different perspectives. The discernment process that kind of goes into, well, what is it? What are we getting? What is the story that we're getting from all of these angles that we all experienced this particular place and these particular people in this particular place?

Karen: You go out together as a group?

Jane Hale: We do. We also go out in pairs and then come back together different times. For instance, our group just agreed to ... We spent the last month in pairs visiting the same diner in town. That happened at different times. Each group went several times and then we actually gathered this past Saturday to debrief and to share what we had noticed, to share some of the themes that were cropping up, to share some of the interactions that we had. As different pairs were sharing their stories with each other, this picture started to emerge and we started to get a better feeling for the whole neighborhood and for the role of this particular place within it, and also almost the spiritual needs and the community needs of the folks who were present at the diner, both that day and on all the days that everybody visited.

Alli: How about that for a job description?

Karen: Yeah. It's not the same as mine.

Alli: Yeah. [crosstalk 00:07:48].

Karen: Walk around the neighborhood and see what's going on.

Alli: See what's going on.

Karen: Get back together and talk about it. Yeah. Just back up just a second. Sunday morning, you lead church services too?

Jane Hale: Absolutely. This is all rooted ... I actually don't ... This is why I said these two jobs are separate but they're incredibly interconnected, because I don't think that you necessarily can do one without the other. I think that that practice of coming together and being a community, a worshiping community of one body in Christ, and we're celebrating together even as we're in three different places, being part of worshiping God in the tradition that has been handed down to us from ... That Christians have been worshiping across time and space for thousands of years is critical because it reminds us of who we are and why we're doing this, why it matters that we're out listening.

Karen: You're with Brooklyn twice a month, is that-

Jane Hale: I am with ... Yes, I'm actually ... I spend ... I'm really blessed to be able to spend one Sunday a month with St. Philip's, one Sunday a month with St. Alban's, and then whatever Sundays are left, two or three, I am at Trinity Brooklyn. We have a great sort of rotation of priests that come through. That's wonderful to be able to share that ministry with other folks and get to worship in three ... Each community has its own beautiful personality and charisms.

Karen: How many lay leaders are coming from each of those different community to be part of that group that wanders around? You go to the three different towns, correct?

Jane Hale: Absolutely, yes.

Karen: How many lay leaders are there?

Jane Hale: There are three people from Trinity in Brooklyn. There are two people from St. Alban's in Danielson and two people from St. Philip's in Putnam. We do visit each town and spend time in each town and help one another. For the folks that are from that town, it's often really a refreshing thing to be able to see that space through new eyes. Yeah. It's actually really beautiful. It's collaborative. It's mutual. It's reminding us how much we need each other.

Alli: What's the geographical area of these towns? I'm not from Connecticut, so I'm constantly learning where the towns are in Connecticut.

Jane Hale: Sure.

Alli: I know these are all in the northwest area.

Karen: Northeast.

Alli: East region, but how far are these churches from each other and that sort of layout?

Jane Hale: Sure. Trinity in Brooklyn is about 10 ... It's under 10 minutes from St. Alban's in Danielson, a 10 minute drive, real easy to get to. St. Philip's is a little bit farther away from Trinity in Brooklyn and St. Alban's in Danielson, but it's probably, I don't know, 15 minute drive from Trinity, which is the farther one away. It's not far. Northeast Connecticut, even though it is made up of distinct towns, there's a real feeling of ... a collaborative feeling there. It's sort of self termed the quiet corner and it includes all of those towns that are in there.

Karen: I've heard that before. I've heard that name before.

Jane Hale: Yeah. That's something that people are really proud of, that they're all kind of in this together. It's sort of multiple communities within a larger community, sort of like the church.

Alli: What sort of challenges have you faced with taking on these two positions simultaneously? That seems to really ... You're busy. What challenges have you seen with this, working with new communities, working with the community in which you live?

Jane Hale: Sure.

Alli: What's that like?

Jane Hale: I've gotten pretty good now at switching hats really fast. Actually I think there's a real comfort level for having been in these communities. Pomfret is not part of the tri-town missional curacy, per se. That's not one of the focuses even though it's part of the larger community. I'm not technically working in my hometown, which is great. I am pretty familiar with the spaces. The gift really has been really getting to know the people by becoming a regular, whether that's at a coffee shop that people start really recognizing me, or just walking down the street with other folks from time to time and we start recognizing each other. It's becoming a regular.

Jane Hale: At first that was a little maybe intimidating because it feels like, well, who am I going to talk to and how do I know I'm not just going to walk around and find nothing? The truth is, and this was pretty evident pretty quickly, as I said before, the Holy Spirit always shows up and I find out what God needs me to find out. I encounter the people and the stories that God needs me to encounter. That's been really a really big gift. I've developed relationships with folks from all kinds of spaces and places and traditions. That's been great.

Jane Hale: One of the things that I think was sort of a hurdle at first for working with folks from the three parishes is that traditionally churches are looking for, or thinking along the paradigm of programs, programs that are going to get us from point A to point B. Specifically in this day and age, churches are often looking for programs that are going to grow the church, getting more people in the pews on a Sunday.

Karen: They talk about getting new blood.

Jane Hale: Yeah. That is not in any way-

Karen: [crosstalk 00:13:58]

Jane Hale: ... any way, shape or form what we're doing.

Karen: Alli?

Jane Hale: Alli's still recovering from that one.

Alli: That image is just so crazy.

Karen: It is, but have you heard it before? Yeah.

Alli: Not in the context of a church, because I'm kind of thinking, okay ...

Karen: Like vampires.

Alli: Yes.

Karen: Yes, I know.

Jane Hale: That's not what we're about, just to be clear.

Alli: This is not the vampire church.

Jane Hale: No, not at all.

Alli: Oh my gosh.

Jane Hale: The thing is is that there's sort of this ... There's definitely a hunger in the churches for connection. There's that, and that's really real. Traditionally what's been sort of thrown out at churches are, "Here, try this, do this program and you'll grow the church, or do this and you'll get more people in the doors." People genuinely want to share how God has impacted their lives and they want to worship God together and they want to do it with a larger group of people, and that's great.

Karen: That's not this.

Jane Hale: That's not this. Coming to people and saying, "Well, I'm going to invite you to come out into the community," and they say, "Well, why?" I say, "Well, we'll find out."

Karen: I don't know.

Jane Hale: I say to people, "We're not starting with an end result in mind." We're actually starting by practicing this art of listening, which turns out is a lot harder than it sounds, to be intentional about approaching anyone's story with an open heart, with open ears,

without needing to judge or affirm even. It's just holding somebody else's sacred story. Whether or not it somehow connects with your life or not, or jives with what you think is ... It doesn't matter. It's holding that sacred story and allowing that to be true. That's hard. It's hard work and it takes practice. We're going to practice listening and we're going to see what God is calling us to next.

Jane Hale: That's like mind blown for a lot of people, like that doesn't make any sense. What's the goal? We don't have ... Well, we don't know, but I imagine God does. Our goal is really just to take the next step and discern together and try something else on to see if we're on the right track, if we're finding out things that seem to make sense, and just continue to pay attention, which is ... That's all I think we can do. God's got this big vision. We are the ones with tunnel vision.

Alli: It's almost like the first thing that comes to my mind hearing you talk about this is that moment right before Jesus approaches the fishermen, right? We know the story, that they're going to drop everything and follow Jesus, but right before then Jesus still takes that risk and goes out. At any moment they could have been like, "No, we're good. I want to just keep fishing over here."

Jane Hale: This makes no sense.

Alli: "This makes no sense. What's the end result here, dude?"

Jane Hale: Right, right.

Alli: Right? But God knows the end result. The reader in the story, or in this case, the people in the parish that you're saying, "Hey, let's go out there. Let's go talk to that person," you don't know what the end result is going to be.

Jane Hale: Right. The beautiful thing is we still don't know what the end result is going to be, however we have been in this particular ... The tri-town guiding team will tell you that through this practice that we've been doing and growing together for the last, I don't know, we started officially meeting in last July so it hasn't even been a year yet, but they will tell you that it has transformed their lives. It's just this practice of listening has transformed their relationships with other people, with their kids, with their spouses, with their church communities. They're helping their church communities to try on some of these practices of listening like dwelling in the word.

Jane Hale: Most of the parishes use that at some point from time to time to kind of root us in scripture and connect what's going on right now with the Christian story of across space and time. They'll tell you that it has really opened not only their minds, but really their hearts in that they, when they're in a place, they're really feeling more like they're in a place. They're noticing more and they're hearing more and they're engaging more. They're aware when people share their stories more, which makes them listen more. They'll tell you that this has ... It sort of has crept up on them. When they look back on it, they're going, "Gosh, I've learned so much through regular practice."

Jane Hale: These are sacred practices. They sound really simple, but they are really beautiful. The results really kind of ... I mean, I say results, that's not even it. It's that ongoing act of transformation that's taking place in those people who are paying attention to something bigger than themselves. It's beautiful. It really is beautiful. It's still unfolding. The story changes a little bit more every time we get together.

Karen: Seems as though the remaining people in the church communities are receptive to those that are participating in these practices, or are they saying, "You're kind of odd, go do your thing?" I don't know. I mean, how are they being received?

Jane Hale: Well, I think at first maybe I bore the, "You're kind of odd. You want us to do what now?" However, we've really established some beautiful relationships. I think at first it was sort of ... It wasn't really a pushing away. It was really more of a question mark. This is intriguing, but how's this going to work out? What does this mean?

Karen: What does it have to do with church?

Jane Hale: What does it have to do with church? We have had the real blessing of having several tri-parish worship services, so all three parishes getting together to worship. Most recently ... We'll do dwelling in the word for the sermon. We actually, we turn it over to the parishes and we say, "Find someone you don't normally attend church with and share where God's tugging on your heart as you hear the scripture for the gospel reading." They love that. I mean, it stretches some people, and for many it's the first time that they're really hearing that, "Oh, wait, God can speak through me too. God is working in me and can speak through me and this matters to this whole group."

Jane Hale: There's that, and they're also hearing the stories as they progress of the people who are actively participating. It's really, I would say there's more of an attitude of curiosity, people who realize they can dabble in some of this. They're invited into it. The tri-town guiding team has held some conversations where they've invited people into participate in some of these practices with the three parishes. There's a growing understanding. The hope, my hope is that more folks will get curious about this and want to be invited into this and then it'll be a continuing practice of discovery, openhearted discovery.

Alli: It seems like it has the potential to kind of just become essential to the everyday life of those parishes and those towns in a way. It's not just that funky ministry of walking around the neighborhood.

Jane Hale: Right.

Alli: It's, no, that's just who we are and that's how we relate to one another.

Jane Hale: Right. Right. Let me just tell you two stories because these are examples of, I don't know, the power of just being present, of actually being a neighbor.

Karen: That'd be wonderful.

Jane Hale: Last year, it was actually shortly after I was ordained to the priesthood, I was in a coffee shop that I have become a regular at and ...

Alli: Hosting coffee hour there. [crosstalk 00:22:14]

Jane Hale: Hosting ... Yeah. I know the servers. I know a lot of the people who are there. It's a casual knowing, but we're neighbors. We recognize that. A gentleman walked in and ... As a woman wearing a priest collar, sometimes I do get sideways glances. It confuses some people. I kind of felt like I was getting that sideways glance. I smiled and didn't get much of a smile back. The gentleman sat in back of me where I couldn't see him. I was about ready to leave and the waitress came over and said, "Your bill has been paid." I looked ... I was really surprised because I hadn't paid it. She said, "This gentleman behind you paid it." It was the gentleman who had walked in and I thought, "Oh, I wonder if I read that wrong."

Jane Hale: I said, "Thank you so much." He said, "It's the least I could do." It was Lent. He said, "It's Lent, and I want to tell you some stories." This gentleman had been in ... He was a Vietnam vet, and he shared with me the most incredible stories of things that he was having trouble reconciling in his own life. He said, "I'm wondering if you'll hear my confession." Now this is in a coffee shop in Putnam, Connecticut. The folks who were at the counter came over, because they were captivated by this story, gathered around and we had church right there. It was the most amazing things.

Alli: Wow. Chills.

Jane Hale: We prayed together.

Karen: Yes.

Jane Hale: He said, "I need to confess this." The fact that just being there and just being present with my neighbors made all the difference in the world. I don't know how many of the people at the counter knew this gentleman, how many didn't. I don't know, but we had a tremendously sacred encounter that just unfolded on its own. It wouldn't have happened if I had been a stranger. That happened sort of at the beginning of this, of my adventures.

Jane Hale: The other was just the other day. Our group, our tri-town guiding team, was gathered at a different diner. We were dwelling in the word together and we were sharing our reflections on what we had encountered over the last month in our pairs as we had visited the diner and the surrounding neighborhood various times. Our waitress, who ... We were probably there for about two hours. At the end of the two hours our waitress came and asked us if we would pray for her. She shared with us that her best friend had a daughter who was struggling with some pretty dire issues. She said, "I get the feeling that you all might be folks who could help me pray."

Jane Hale: She sat down at our table and we held hands and our tri-town guiding team prayed for her and prayed for her friend and her friend's daughter. Again, it was church happening,

and yet we weren't in a church building. It was unfolding in present time and it was just ... We had to be there. We had to be connected to that space in order for that to happen. It was just really beautiful, beautiful stories of connection.

Karen: The lay people that were there didn't all push it over to you as the ordained leader ...

Jane Hale: No.

Karen: ... who would be the natural person that one would think, "Oh, we'll let our priest do this for us." They took on the responsibility.

Jane Hale: She was clearly asking the whole group. It was a group of ... There were eight of us at the table and she asked the whole group. She said, "You seem like a group of people who could help me pray about this." It was a gift. It was a real gift. Again, it was an affirmation of that ministry of presence and that ministry of being in a place with an open heart. Things like that happen all the time. That's the gift.

Jane Hale: One of connections that I have made by being in Danielson is meeting folks from our local temple. They're business owners who are members of the temple. It's actually a really special place. It's a community that was begun by Holocaust survivors. A lot of the children have moved to different towns, but this is still a really important and sacred space for people. They have worship on high holidays together and they all come in from all over the place. Then there are still folks that are still in town, which is lovely too.

Jane Hale: Through connections that I had in the community, I was sort of amazed to be, or honored really to ... They asked me to preach at their Rosh Hashanah service. I thought, how do I do that? How do I do that with my own voice? They said, "Well, we want to hear your voice and we want to hear maybe what Christianity has to say to the themes of Rosh Hashanah." I said, "Okay, I'd love to." I went and I celebrated Rosh Hashanah with them. It was a gift to be able to preach, and we talked about Jesus and we talked about ... using I statements, but it was a real gift. Afterwards we got to talking about how we need to do more of this hearing each other's stories.

Jane Hale: From there, we decided we would start this collaborative effort in the community to hold conversations. We have started this series of conversations, interfaith conversations called, who is my neighbor? Real folks, real stories, real life. We're really excited about it because it's an opportunity for us to hear and hold each other's stories even if they're not the same stories as our own, but practice with the community, not just with our churches, but really with the community. How do we listen in a culture? Because the message that keeps coming back for all of us is how hungry our culture is to be heard and to make connections. There's, I think, a message for the church in there as well. We can't do it if we don't cross the boundaries that get set up by, I don't know, identity politics and labels that we slap on each other. We can't do that. We've got to cross those boundaries so that we can find out that we're all brothers and sisters. This is who we are and we're all connected. We may have different stories, but we're all connected really deeply and in profound ways.

Karen: We have to listen without an agenda, without our own agenda.

Jane Hale: Exactly.

Karen: Just whatever God's agenda is.

Jane Hale: Yeah. Really-

Karen: That's hard.

Jane Hale: Yeah. It's really about sitting and listening and holding the completeness of somebody else's story without having to say, "Oh yeah, I had that happen to me. Oh, you think that was bad?" It's really holding it and honoring it as sacred story. When we do that, whether I'm hearing somebody's sacred story over a more guided conversation or whether it's something natural that's happening in a coffee shop or on a street corner or wherever it is, if I can hold that person's conversation, we develop a connection that goes beyond any preconceived notion that I could have brought to the table or anything that I can just come up with with my own small mindedness or ... Yeah. It's pretty expansive.

Alli: Wow.

Karen: Yes.

Alli: I think I've gotten chills like four or five times just sitting here. It's been amazing.

Jane Hale: Oh, thanks.

Karen: Sacred stories.

Alli: Sacred stories, power of listening and ...

Jane Hale: Yeah.

Karen: Transformation taking places in churches. I am impressed by the number of lay people that are being transformed as well, really taking the leadership roles.

Alli: We're all for lay leadership.

Jane Hale: As am I.

Karen: We're all for clergy leadership too, and lay leadership.

Jane Hale: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Alli: Well, thank you so much for joining us.

Jane Hale: Thanks for having me. This was fun.

Alli: This was great.

Karen: Yeah, this was terrific. I learned a lot.

Jane Hale: Me too.

Alli: Well, you can find us on our website at CoffeeHour.org.

Karen: Or on Facebook or Twitter or Instagram at Coffee Hour Pod.

Alli: Feel free to send us an email if you have an idea of some cool ministry that's happening around Connecticut or people that you think we should be in touch with.

Karen: Absolutely.

Alli: All right. Goodbye.

Karen: Goodbye.