



Minister to the People:
A Conversation with Veronica Cannon

April 25, 2024

Transcript



Sara Hayden: Veronica, welcome to the podcast. Thanks for being here.

Veronica Cannon: Thanks. It's good to be here.

Sara: I'm looking forward to all the different paths our conversations might take this particular morning on Maundy Thursday, which is actually the date that we are recording this particular episode.

Veronica: Yes, it is Maundy Thursday. And I have an extremely busy weekend 'cause I'm doing services on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, the Great Vigil of Easter, and then Easter Sunday morning. Busy weekend.

Sara: You're checking all the boxes. Yes (laughs).

Veronica: Yes (laughs).

Sara: Okay, how do you feel as someone who is not just participating in the mystery and passion of these days but is enabling others to do that through your leadership?

Veronica: Well, it is always a privilege to lead people through Holy Week and to help them to take this marvelous journey walking into darkness and then back into God's marvelous light. And that's always a pleasure and a privilege to do.

Sara: When you were a child growing up in the faith, do you have particular memories of any of those services that stay with you today?

Veronica: Well, my father was a Presbyterian minister. And we would often times have, like, Maundy Thursday services or sometimes a Good Friday service. But I was really young, and by the time I came of age, he had moved on from parish work to working at a university. So I remember worship services, not particularly Easter services unless it was Easter Sunday morning.

Sara: Oh, yeah. What do you remember about Easter Sunday?

Veronica: Oh, well, Easter Sunday was always a fun time. The biggest thing for me as a child growing up was just getting dressed up for Easter in your Easter Sunday dress and your Easter shoes and your hat with your little purse and-

Sara: (laughs).

Veronica: ... going to church with other little girls and boys, and then running around the church on Easter Sunday morning. And I remember my dad preaching-

Sara: Yeah. Wow.

Veronica: ... Easter egg hunts, that type of thing. As a child, those are the kind of memories you have.

Sara: I love that. I have two radically different questions that come up for me with that image of you in your Easter Sunday finest as a young child. And one is quite frivolous and one is maybe less frivolous. But the frivolous question is, what I love to know is what kids keep in their purses-

Veronica: (laughs).

Sara: ... because I just think it's amazing (laughs), like, you know, if you're listening and you're like, you were the kid, the six-year-old with the purse. What did Veronica put in her purse, uh, for Easter Sunday.

Veronica: Veronica often just had a lotta candy from her Easter basket-

Sara: Yes, yes.

Veronica: ... in her purse on Easter Sunday morning and maybe a pencil.

Sara: (laughs) Right. So, um, did your dad preach differently on Easter as far as you remember? Was there a different kind of feel to it or a different cadence to his worship services on Easter, his preaching?

Veronica: No. I think his services were all pretty much the same.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Veronica: He was your typical Presbyterian minister. Everything was "decent and in order".

Sara: Okay.

Veronica: And I only remember one particular Sunday. And it really wasn't an Easter Sunday, but I remember one particular Sunday morning where I think he got overcome-

Sara: Hmm.

Veronica: ... as he was preaching and he said something. And he actually, in the midst of that, sort of bowed down to the ground.

Sara: Wow.

Veronica: I was like, "Wow, he's really into this sermon today."

Sara: Yeah, yeah. You've seen them all, right?

Veronica: That only happened one time (laughs). Yes.

Sara: You're the authority. Wow. You said, um, a Presbyterian phrase that we tend to use to describe ourselves, "Decently and in order." I think a lot of us nod when we hear that; we kinda know what it means. What does it mean to you? And does it mean something differently? Do you lean into that? Is that something Presbyterians aspire to? Or is something we're afflicted by?

Veronica: I think "decent and in order" to me means that you just do things in a certain way.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Veronica: You follow a certain order of worship.

Sara: Okay.

Veronica: And it has a certain order, and you do things according to the way. We do it by the *Book of Order*.

Sara: Okay.

Veronica: I do that, but I also believe in fluidity in worship. And so if... I know some churches, you might forget to do something, and people can get really bent outta shape. It's like, "You didn't do this. You forgot to say this." Or, you know, that type of thing. But I believe in fluidity. And the Spirit moves as it moves. And if you are doing a worship service and you forget to do the Lord's Prayer, you might say the prayers of the people, but you might forget to do the Lord's Prayer. Or if you forget to do some element of worship-

Sara: Yeah, yeah.

Veronica: ... I'm not gonna get bent outta shape about it. And I'd usually tell people, "It's gonna be okay. There's next Sunday." (laughs).

Sara: (laughs) Yeah, there's an interesting kind of, like, tension in that space. Your work, in particular that you have been focused on recently heading up our denominations initiative known as Vital Congregations, which-

Veronica: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... started in 2017 and has been a focused initiative to help worshiping communities, churches of different ages and stages renew, recover and live more fully into faithful discipleship to Jesus Christ. I've always felt like there's, like, a little bit of tension. Growing up, lifelong Presbyterian, as listeners know, and both my grandparents, grandma and grandpa were ordained Presbyterian elders. First Pres, Topeka, Kansas. I felt like that sometimes there's a tension either mentally, spiritually of that kind of order sort of authoritative documentation that we have nationally, *Book of Order*, et cetera, and feeling free to do what the Spirit requires of us. Have you seen examples of that? The tension between this is the order in which our worship goes, or this is how we have conversations as Presbyterians and the urgency of the moment and what the Holy Spirit might be inviting us into.

Veronica: I believe that we have to make room for the Holy Spirit to work in worship service. And not even only in worship, but in our lives. Sometimes we have an idea of how we want worship to go-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Veronica: ... or how we think worship should be for everyone, but I have seen instances where the Holy Spirit moves that could take you totally off track, take you totally away from what you may have planned-

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: ... because God may have planned something differently. And I believe we have to remain open to the Holy Spirit's movement 'cause I think if we block the Spirit, then we're not really reaching people where they are and we're not helping them to see Christ in new ways. We're not helping them to receive the word in a new and refreshing way if we just stick to what we want and we do things the way we want them to happen.

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: I think we have to really find ways to let the Holy Spirit move and express itself in the way it's going to be expressed.

Sara: Mm-hmm. That image from your childhood on Easter Sunday of your father physically being overcome, like bending over in that moment, of course we can only imagine what happened to him in that particular moment, but it makes me think of at times the Holy Spirit does intercede and break with our own plans and cadence. And all we can do is bend over or tear up or observe silence.

Veronica: Yeah, I would say there have been moments even when I have been in worship and even during a preaching moment-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Veronica: ... where I have my manuscript in front of me, but the Holy Spirit takes me totally away from the manuscript-

Sara: Yeah, yeah.

Veronica: ... where I'm preaching and Spirit just takes me somewhere else. And I'm thinking, how I'm gonna get back to my manuscript?

Sara: Yeah, right. Exactly.

Veronica: And I never do.

Sara: Exact. Okay.

Veronica: I never do because the Holy Spirit says, "That's nice. You wrote that, that's great. But there are people that need to hear this." I remember... This is an absolutely true story (laughs). One Sunday, I was preaching, and something happened in the world the night before. I can't remember, but it was one of those events where something happens on a Saturday night-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Veronica: ... in the world, and you're like, "I had prepared this sermon."

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: And I was new to ministry.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Veronica: I had prepared this sermon, had it all written out. And it was one of these love, joy, peace, one of these really great kinds of services. And that thing happened Saturday night. And Sunday morning when I woke up, I heard about this in the news and I said, "Oh my goodness. I cannot preach this sermon today. People are hurting."

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: There was a catastrophe that happened in our world, and this sermon is not gonna work. And I was fretting about that the whole morning because, you know, I was of the idea you had to really do your word, studies, and (laughs), you know-

Sara: We have great words in our sermon. Great imagery painstakingly crafted. Yes.

Veronica: Yes. I had the stories and everything. And I just knew that sermon wasn't gonna work. And so I remember standing in the pulpit that morning, and I said to the congregation... I was very honest with them, and I said, "I had a very different sermon prepared for today, but that sermon... I can't preach that sermon today. And so we're just gonna ask the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us." And I found a passage of worship while I was sitting in the pulpit-

Sara: Mm. Wow.

Veronica: ... that I thought would be appropriate for the day. 'Cause initially, I was thinking, well, what... How can I still use this sermon-

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: ... and still speak about hope and joy for another day? But I said, "It wasn't working." And so I found a passage of scripture, and we just prayed about that passage of scripture. And we talked about what that meant when people are hurting and people don't have answers; what does that mean?

Sara: Wow.

Veronica: And that's what the service was. And I just kinda let the Holy Spirit lead me and guide me in that. And it was one of the most beautiful services we'd ever had, not because I was preaching but because I let the Holy Spirit move. And people just responded in a way that met their needs-

Sara: Mm.

Veronica: ... and helped them to heal and not hurt so much. But that wasn't Veronica's doing; I really felt like that was a movement of God.

Sara: Yeah. Wow. And how did the congregation respond to that in your own memory?

Veronica: They responded very well to that. I didn't really preach a sermon, I just sort of prayed through it. I think that may have been the Sunday even where I had people to call out, uh, the situations that they wanted to pray about.

Sara: Mm.

Veronica: So it was a very call and response kind of a thing.

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: And had people to tell stories about hurt and hope and hope. That's how we kinda got through that service. I was really new at it (laughs) and very nervous, but it worked out.

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: It gave people a chance to feel their pain but then hold onto hope for a brighter tomorrow.

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: I've also had situations too... Just speaking about the Holy Spirit moving, there were two services that I was in, two different churches, but similar things happened. One, during the time I was preaching... And maybe this is a sign that maybe God is telling me I should preach (laughs). During the preaching moment, someone had a heart attack.

Sara: Oh.

Veronica: And I was standing in the pulpit, so when I looked out, I saw this man just sorta slump over.

Sara: Yep.

Veronica: And a couple of people didn't notice it at first, but then somebody sitting next to the man that's slumped over looked up and realized that something was wrong. And I started pointing for somebody to help her. So I just stopped preaching.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Veronica: After awhile, there were nurses and doctors. Thank God there were nurses and doctors in this worship service. They rushed over to him and they put him on the floor and they started doing CPR on him. And because there were children in the room, I asked someone to take the children outta the rooms 'cause I didn't want them to be nervous about what they were seeing.

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: And so I said, "Could somebody take the children out and do some things with the children?"

Sara: Oh.

Veronica: And then I said, "The rest of us are just gonna spend some time in prayer." And we just started pray. I, I really, I think I turn to prayer in those moments 'cause those are important times. But we just prayed. We prayed for him, we prayed for God to be with all of us, 'cause there were people who were so concerned about him. And then my musician was also a very good musician; he just started playing music. And we sang a couple of hymns. The EMT got there and they continued to work on him, and then they took him out. And we never really got back to the sermon because, again, that was a move of, I think, the Holy Spirit.

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: It was just minister to the people, Veronica.

Sara: Mm.

Veronica: Minister to them. They're hurting right now, they're scared; minister to them. And so that's what I did in that moment.

Sara: Oh. I love that story. And whether we've been there or not, as clergy I think we all sort of wonder about that moment, knowing that, like, inevitably it was come. There's a medical emergency in the congregation. And it says in the Marks of Vital Congregations, there's a, a mark of Spirit-inspired worship.

Veronica: Yes.

Sara: And it's juxtaposed with the stale ritual divorced of meaning or self-gratifying worship. What strikes me is how envious I often am of nurses and doctors who, in my mind, I think they have a script. You know, like, they know in that moment cardiac arrest; here's what we're gonna do. You know, they have the steps that they take to address the person who is exhibiting these signs. And it... As someone in a very different profession, I often feel like, how great (laughs) to have not only that one doctor or one nurse, but all of the doctors and nurses in the congregation kind of share that same training. Eh, they share that same commitment to particular responses based on the symptoms being exhibited.

But what also strikes me through your story is that you have that too. And I forget that. Like, you knew what to do. Your calling as a minister and a church leader, disciple of Jesus as well had equipped you for this moment. And you trusted the Holy Spirit, you trusted God to accompany you to do what needed to be done.

Veronica: Yeah. I also remember too, that particular Sunday was the Sunday I was supposed to baptize a baby.

Sara: Oh.

Veronica: And after they carried this gentleman out and took him to the hospital, I asked the parents, I said, "Do you all want to schedule this for another Sunday?" And they told me, "No." They said they still wanted to baptize their baby.

Sara: Aw.

Veronica: And so it was just a sign of, again, the Spirit moving where here someone was sick and was carried outta the hospital. Thank God the man lived. But here was somebody who wanted their child to become a part of the body of Christ. And they were willing to stand in for their child and they wanted to continue, and so we continued with worship.

Sara: Wow. Yeah.

Veronica: I think a big thing is all about relationship.

Sara: Mm.

Veronica: You know, we talk about the cross, right? You got your vertical and you got your horizontal. And I, I've said this to congregations that I've served and even the one that I'm currently serving. "If you get your vertical right, you could get your horizontal right."

Sara: Okay.

Veronica: And I think that for me, as a pastor, my relationship with Christ has to be so intact and so... Not perfect, because I'm not a perfect person. And I tell my congregations that too. I... "If you're looking for perfection in your pastor, I'm not the one for you-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Veronica: "... because I am not a perfect being." But I do think that my relationship with Christ is key because you don't wanna go to a doctor and your doctor says, "Well, I don't, I don't really think about medicine."

Sara: Yeah, that's a good point (laughs).

Veronica: You don't wanna go to a lawyer and your lawyer says, "I don't know anything about the law." You don't also want to go to a church where your pastor says, "I don't have a relationship with the Lord. I know nothing about him except for what the Bible tells me."

Sara: Mm.

Veronica: Because even the devil knows scripture, right?

Sara: Yeah.

Veronica: That doesn't mean the devil has a relationship with the Lord.

Sara: Mm.

Veronica: You have to try to do all that you can to build a sincere and honest, authentic relationship with the Lord. And when people see that you have that and you touch them and you built relationships with them that are built on your relationship with Christ, that vertical and that horizontal, if I get my life right with Christ, I can get my life right with others. And when I'm building my relationship with other people of Christ, it inspired them, hopefully, to do likewise. Not that they're not already doing it because I'm doing it, but hopefully their spark, their relationship with Christ and their relationship with others should also have an effect on me. We should all have that effect on one another.

Sara: Mm.

Veronica: So I think it starts with the relationship.

Sara: Yeah, yeah.

Veronica: When I know Christ and then I can relate to what I know people in my congregation are going through because I know their stories, I'm not telling their stories publicly, but it helps me in my worship to minister to the needs of a congregation when you know what those needs are.

Sara: Yeah.