



Young Justice Builders:
A Conversation with Sara Pantazes
July 11, 2024



Transcript

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

Sara Pantazes: Thank you. I'm thrilled to be here.

Sara Hayden: I am so glad that we have the chance to dig in a little deeper on some of the work you've been doing, which is super relevant for not just young people and their families, but people of faith and people maybe curious about it. So thanks for being here.

Sara Pantazes: Yeah, definitely.

Sara Hayden: Sometimes we start the podcast asking our guests to share a little bit about their faith context, but I found something on your website that was so succinct and compelling that I'm wondering if I can read it aloud to you and have you expand upon it.

Sara Pantazes: Sure.

Sara Hayden: Okay. So you have a great website.

Sara Pantazes: Thank you.

Sara Hayden: Yeah, very thoughtful in which you describe where you're coming from in terms of the material that you bring that people can access. And the title is actually "What I Believe", which is not a menu item on everyone's website, but is typical for ministry leaders. And under "What I Believe", you describe - and you have a header: "it's important for me to know the theological underpinnings of any product I bring to my church, especially if it's for use with children, in case you are curious below a few of the foundations of my faith that influence my work." And the first thing you say is "love wins, period." How did you choose that phrase, which I love. (laughs).

Sara Pantazes: (laughs). Honestly, it's the title of a Rob Bell book-

Sara Hayden: Mm-hmm.

Sara Pantazes: ... that I read a long time ago. And for me it's just what it all boils down to, that God is love and love wins always and forever. And anything else we say about God or faith I hold in comparison to that foundation. And if they are intention with one another, love wins is what wins for me. (laughs).

Sara Hayden: Yeah. I had forgotten the title of that book and that it was highly controversial.

Sara Pantazes: Yes. (laughs).

Sara Hayden: Do you remember that?

Sara Pantazes: A little bit.

Sara Hayden: It's highly controversial for Christians to say that the most important thing is that love wins. So I'm wondering if you have thoughts on that of like, why is it so controversial? What do we feel like is at stake to decide love wins rather than something else winning? And what is the alternative to love winning?

Sara Pantazes: Yeah. This may be overly simplistic and perhaps not even fully accurate, but I think a lot of the pushback that Rob Bell gets is from more evangelical fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible. And I think a lot of people with that lens of interpretation focus so much on salvation and you either get God's love or you don't. And there's some really hard implications to that. And I just don't agree with that interpretation of the Bible. And I think if you can let go of that dichotomy, you can read the Bible and understand the story it tells about God through the lens of love, that everything started with love and everything will end with love and everything in between.

Like God's love is there for the taking if we choose to open ourselves to it and pursue it and be grabbed by it. But that's not maybe the most common understanding of Christian theology in our country today, which is part of why I think the theology is so important, (laughs), and why I, I work so hard on the curriculums and lessons that I bring to my church because I think it's really important that we start leaning in this direction.

Sara Hayden: Wow. Yes. You use this term simplistic or overly simple, but I think there is a certain clarity that is important when you are choosing what you want to direct people's attention to. Particularly kids. You know, you don't come with a thousand different options for uh, curriculum. And I think we live in a culture that is exposed to a lot of different things that we're asked to pay attention to simultaneously, sometimes on the same device, which makes us feel a little crazy.

But you have a really beautiful way in your materials of directing attention intentionally. I'm wondering if you would tell us a little bit about this Young Justice Builders Club.

Sara Pantazes: Yes. This was originally envisioned to be a Lenten program for the families in my church. The church wide was gonna do a Lenten campaign focusing on homelessness. And we were doing adult book study as part of that and a fundraising campaign as part of that. And I wanted the kids to have some kind of connection to it. So I came up with this phrase of Young Justice Builders Club and we were gonna meet four times kids and their caretakers were supposed to stay with them and start to lean into some of the basics of poverty and

hopelessness and help kids, uh, get an understanding of that. And we got two sessions in, and COVID hit. (laughs).

So we never fully finished the original, how it was originally envisioned, but in those first two sessions that we were able to do in person, I got positive feedback from the families that participated. And I felt really strongly about it that I wanted to keep it going, but we did keep it going and we're back in person now. Um, so we have four Young Justice Builder Club sessions a year for elementary aged kids at my church and their families to talk about the injustices of the world from a faith-based perspective at a level that elementary school kids can understand, hopefully when I do my job right. (laughs).

Kids already know that things are hard in the world and that bad things happen. And the goal is to intentionally talk about those things so that as they grow in their understanding, part of their understanding of those things is God and how it fits into the picture of how God is at work in the world.

Sara Hayden: Absolutely. Would you talk a little bit about the social location of the children in your congregation? Are they adjacent to issues of injustice or are there folks in the Young Justice Builders Club who are experiencing things like homelessness as you talk about those experiences in people's lives?

Sara Pantazes: For the most part, the answer is no.

Sara Hayden: Mm-hmm.

Sara Pantazes: They are not adjacent to the injustices we've talked about. So we've talked about poverty, we have talked about climate change and creation care. Non-violence was the other big series that we've done. So in that sense, creation care, non-violence, everybody is impacted by those on a broad sense. But that is a thing I'm very aware of when I'm writing the lessons and when I'm giving them in my context, is that for the most part, I and the children I'm, I'm working with in my church have not suffered injustices on a real personal, literal level, but I'm writing lessons and putting them out there into the big whole broad world for other people to use.

So I try to be really clear, like, think about your context, (laughs), how is this gonna sound to the kids that you're talking about? And you might need to adjust. And I try to be clear that I'm happy to talk to anybody that wants to talk through how to do that. And we're navigating that. And my church right now, just separate from Young Justice Builders for VBS this summer, we're gonna take a family field trip over to our food cupboard on the day that we talk about food for the kids to see how their community helps people who need food. But I think there's at least one family in my church that has had to go to the food cupboard because they financially needed the help.

And I'm trying to figure out right now how to talk to those parents ahead of time.

Sara Hayden: Yeah.

Sara Pantazes: I don't know if they would show up for it when we're thinking about these things, you do have to think about the people you intimately know who might show up and how it's gonna impact them or how they'll receive it.

Sara Hayden: Absolutely. You've been so generous of the ways in which you've both invited people to access this material from their own clubs, the passion behind that and getting these topics out there and uncovering and recovering the roots of our faith and also the evident tension in recognizing that we are accessing the story of our faith from myriad different contexts, including which side of the needle we fall on.

Whether we are for the topic of food insecurity, for example, whether we've experienced that ourselves or whether in a lot of congregations and in many Presbyterian congregations, which tend to be known in the larger Christian traditions as one of the wealthier mainline Protestant denominations-

Sara Pantazes: Mm-hmm.

Sara Hayden: ... where we are looking at issues of injustices. That is something that happens to people, other people that we help with.

Sara Pantazes: Mm-hmm.

Sara Hayden: What are your hopes for the families in your congregation and the children who are leaning into this work in terms of how they see their role and their identity as both children of faith, children of God, and the solidarity that we're called to as people of faith with other people of faith who experience very different economic realities? Just to throw one thing out there, right?

Sara Pantazes: Mm-hmm. One of the early lessons I did with our Young Justice Builders Club, I think I called it the Two Feet of Justice or something like that. And the point of the lesson was to explore the difference between what we call charity and justice, which are imperfect terms, both of them. But the point was that acts of charity or whatever words you want to use, meet immediate needs. So the back to school, school supply drives and the food cupboards and the clothing closets, like those are meeting immediate needs. And churches do that all the time. And that's good work and that's important work. But if that's all we're doing. (laughs).

Sara Hayden: Mm-hmm.

Sara Pantazes: We're never gonna stop needing to do that for people. And justice is the other side of that where you look at the big picture of why are people in need of these things and what can we do to change that situation so that we get to a place of more economic, (laughs),

you know, parity with people, which is a big dream to say to a person of any age. But that's where our faith comes in. Because the point is that God can get us there.

Sara Hayden: Mm-hmm.

Sara Pantazes: It's not impossible, (laughs), there's a lot of problems in the world that we have the resources to solve if we choose to. And I do not expect the kids at my church – I don't have concrete expectations of any kid who might do these lessons that they will grow up and make that come to reality in the world. However, I choose to believe, I really hope that if we raise children with that sense of God's empowerment and vision as part of who they are, then maybe they will grow up to be adults who make different choices in the world and work together in different ways than the current adults in the world seem to be able to.

And again, this might be a really simplistic, but I don't think we really talked about justice with kids for the last, I don't know how many decades in the church. You know, we taught Bible stories and when you taught the story of the Good Samaritan, maybe you then did a service project to help somebody in need. But it's taking it to a different level of engaging with the kids of what does it mean to help those who need help in the world?

Sara Hayden: Yeah.

Sara Pantazes: In the name of God who's gonna empower you along the way. I have to believe it's gonna make a difference somehow.

Sara Hayden: Yes. Oh, it's no surprise that we haven't, because Christianity has come to the West in the context of genocide, which we don't talk about a lot. The Christians did not show up in the new world, (laughs), trying to promote social justice. N- nobody was like rolling up there and like, you know, let's figure this out together. In fact, many of the cultures represented indigenously in the United States. This is a sweeping generalization, but did have more equitable social structures than the Christians rolling up in the new world.

And in fact, many missionaries among the Catholic ones in Mesoamerica at the time, were converted to the indigenous idea of we're coming in thinking of these people as heathens talking about them literally in their journals and beginning to be converted in a sense to the way of life of they were called Indians at the time as they observed the love and justice of these communities.

Sara Pantazes: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Sara Hayden: It's a very uncomfortable subject for a lot of folks. We don't wanna hear our pastors talk about that, and we don't know what to do with that. But the fact that when we think about charity without the other foot of injustice, our children can get the idea and our adults that there's something morally, theologically, or even practically wrong with, or there's a sense of will that someone would experience poverty or challenges in life.

Sara Pantazes: Yeah. And at the same time, you know, you're talking about our Presbyterian tradition as one of the more wealthy ones. I think one of our attributes is also an educational denomination. Like we have a lot of seminaries, (laughs), you know, attached to our dominations name. So if learning is part of our heritage as well, there's a lot of learning to be done here. And maybe it doesn't have to be scary. I was a history major in college, so I come by this naturally.

Sara Hayden: Yeah. What an interesting time to do this work, too.

Sara Pantazes: Culture wars have really turned history into a controversial thing, which I think is really sad. But if you can get people to come with an open heart, there's so much learning to do, and then you connect that with our faith. And I think that's so interesting. And I know not everybody's spiritual gift is learning, but starting with the kids, I don't have specific intentions for what this will do with the adults, but I do have hopes that maybe it will spread over time to other groups.

Sara Hayden: Yes. And you know, I'm on your website here.

Sara Pantazes: Mm-hmm.

Sara Hayden: And I can see the different introductory series and series of lessons that you have offered to the larger community beyond your church. Could we pick one and talk about what it was like for you to promote receptivity to this club? Was it hard to do? Did the children take to it right away? Was there tension, and then, like, what's actually in the curriculum?

Sara Pantazes: Yeah. Creation Care and *Cory and the Seventh Story* were the ones I did last year.

Sara Hayden: Yeah.

Sara Pantazes: So those will be freshest in my head.

Sara Hayden: Tell us about *Cory and the Seventh Story*.

Sara Pantazes: Yeah, *Cory and the Seventh Story* is a children's book written by Gareth Higgins and Brian McLaren. And it came in partnership with an adult version of the story that was just an e-book. And I read through both of them at the time. The general premise is that there are six stories that humans tell themselves, that we get ourselves into that lead to conflict. And the Seventh Story is our alternative. It's the way that Jesus invites us to live, which is a way of nonviolence and getting along with one another, caring for each other. Love, pick the feel good adjective.

So there was the grownup version of that, and then this children's storybook. And I read it at the time and I was like, oh, this is awesome. And I have no idea what to do with it, so I just put it

on the shelf for a while. Right? And then the Ukraine War started in 2022, and that winter/spring, I had a thought of like, I wonder how I would talk about this war with my kids. There wasn't like an urgent pressing need for it, it was just a passing thought. And I thought, *Cory and the Seventh Story*.

Sara Hayden: Mm-hmm.

Sara Pantazes: That's what I would bring to the table. I would read them this book to help them understand the types of conflicts that humans can get themselves into. What's posted on the website is actually a revised version of my lessons. (laughs).

Sara Hayden: Yeah.

Sara Pantazes: I wrote four lessons, I did them all with my kids, and then I went back and redid a good few parts that didn't go well the first time. And on top of all that, in between the two things, the authors republished the children's book in 2023, I think. And it was probably 80% the same, but they simplified it in a way that made it stronger. And they got a different illustrator. It's a really solid children's book now, but each of the six stories, it's just laid out so simply like: Domination is the first one, and it talks about one character going to somebody's house and taking their bike.

Sara Hayden: Yeah.

Sara Pantazes: And the character's like, "what are you doing?" And he's like, "well, I wanted this, so I'm taking it." So the kids can totally understand that, you know, siblings do that to each-

Sara Hayden: Wow.

Sara Pantazes: ... other all the time. But that's also what Putin did to Ukraine.

Sara Hayden: Mm-hmm.

Sara Pantazes: I want this, so I'm going to take it. So it's these stories that kids understand.

Sara Hayden: Yeah.

Sara Pantazes: We explored them two at a time. We looked at where we can find them in the Bible, how we might want God to respond to them, and kind of took it from there.

Sara Hayden: Wow.

Sara Pantazes: And I actually turned it into a sermon too that I gave at my church. And that was really fun as well to share with the adults. And they found it to be pretty powerful as well.

Sara Hayden: Mm-hmm. It strikes me that it's... (laughs) I mean, just, this is not funny. Why am I laughing? I mean, just the ridiculousness of the immediate corollaries to like the bike stealing and then someone invading a country to claim it, which is certainly part of our country's story as well. And as adults, how often we disassociate our faith from international conflict and issues of injustice on the global sphere and say, well, it's simple with someone's bike when you take it as a child, that's different than international relations on the global sphere.

This is just more complicated or it's too difficult to solve, it's too late to solve it. But then again, going back to your belief and testimony to these kids, the hard thing, the reality on a global sphere and the conviction that love wins-

Sara Pantazes: Mm-hmm.

Sara Hayden: ... the conviction that God, if we want to, can help us come together. And-

Sara Pantazes: I mean, the goal that we're all working for hopefully is God's kingdom on earth.

Sara Hayden: Mm-hmm.

Sara Pantazes: And as progressive people of faith, to use another buzz word, our belief is that what we are doing as we live our lives is moving the needle in that direction. Like ultimately God will bring it to true fruition, but it's not distant from us. Like we are living the kingdom of God imperfectly in the here and now. And we can choose to move that closer to what God actually wants it to be. We're not just waiting for, you know, the rapture or whatever.

Sara Hayden: Absolutely.