



Death Doula and Church Midwife:

More with Jess Cook

September 7, 2023

Transcript



Sara Hayden: I spent the morning, you know, knowing our connection of we love... You and both love nature, plants. I mean, it s- it sounds to the, at this point, even silly to say, quote, "Nature," end quote, because it's all connected.

Jess Cook: Right.

Sara: But I spent the morning walking for quite a while in the prairie be- around my house, and thinking about the different creatures whose job it is to be themselves.

Jess: Mm-hmm.

Sara: You know? The hawk's job is to be a hawk (laughs). Th- That's it.

Jess: Mm-hmm.

Sara: You know? The monarch job is to be a monarch for the entire part of their lives. And they have to contend with humans' confusion about what our job is, which is so often to not absorb, or you know, to absorb what is around us and to be present in our bodies, to understand what it means to be who we are, humans, in relation to others. But, the things we say about our goal as human beings in our larger cultures, which I think do connect so deeply to capitalism. "You can be anything you want to be," we say to children.

Jess: Mm-hmm.

Sara: Which is meant to be a liberative thing, but I think it has a dark side too-

Jess: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... of so often, we hear that as, "You can have anything you want."

Jess: Mm-hmm.

Sara: "You can have any title you want. You can own anything or anyone you want in that process."

Jess: Mm-hmm.

Sara: "You can live anywhere you want. You can take whatever you want."

Jess: Mm-hmm.

Sara: And to be successful means to tick the boxes off of what kind of job that you have-

Jess: Right.

Sara: ... what kind of title you have, what school you went to, what grades you have-

Jess: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... what diagnosis you have or do not have, and boy, it sure makes a case, when you think about all the things confronting us, of how disciplined we really need to be, as individuals and healers-

Jess: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... you know, people who are leaders of religious communities, of beginning to understand and open up to a much deeper self-understanding.

Jess: Right. And well, and I think there's an invitation, right? I think that's also the thing, is that what we have before us is this really beautiful invitation, to really know what we are and who we are. And I've found that even just sort of naming... You know, listening to different meditations. I listened to a lot of Ram Dass, but-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jess: ... even just, just what it is to be, you know? Learning what it is to just be here, and what a gift it is to exist here. But capitalism always tells us we need to go more.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jess: We need to go to the next thing. We need to do whatever we can, ignore the past, and white supremacy, they work so well together, and the church has been so comfortable right there, because it's maintained power. It's been a way to sort of maintain relevance, and a lot of times to also push its agenda, you know? And that's looked different ways for different churches, denominations and things throughout history.

Sara: Yeah.

Jess: So last summer, summer '22, I was, um, working as the pastor in residence at Camp Hanover, our presbytery's camp. So I was out there, and they were talking about creation for the whole week. And so they're talking about the creation story, and one morning, I was talking with this group of, uh, like eight-year-olds, about the part of the creation story when God refers

to God's self in the plural, so right before God creates humanity, right? God says at least two or three times-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jess: I think, "Let us create them." It happens again with Babel. I can remember when I was in seminary and we talked about this. It was like, "Well, who's there with God? Who's us?"

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jess: It was like, "Maybe it's a divine council, or it's like the royal we-"

Sara: (laughs) Yeah.

Jess: Or it's the Trinity, you know? A lot of f- And it's like that's... I'm not even going to entertain that, but-

Sara: (laughs)

Jess: ... I found all of those answers to be quite dissatisfying, you know? It's like, "But who's there, really?" And, um, and so I asked this group of kids, like, "Who's there with God?" And this eight-year-old kid named Jeremy said, "Earth."

Sara: Aww.

Jess: I was like, "Oh." That water that god broods over, ooh [inaudible]. We skip right over that.

Sara: Yeah.

Jess: So then, I'm thinking about how Jesus in those times, in the gospels, where the scribe comes up to him and calls him "Good teacher," and Jesus says, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God." And then I was like, "Wait a second. Like, Jesus was a good Jew. Like, he would have known, at the end of every day of creation, or at six times during creation, not the end of every day, but six times of creati- seven times God says, 'It is good.'" And at the day when humanity is made, it is very good. And then I'm like, "Is there this correlation between the good and nature creation," you know? Like, are we missing something, that God really is creation in this way, you know? So then, it, it would actually make more sense, when God created Adam, you know, this Earth person, gave form to Eve, life, right? It's like, Earth gave form to the mother of all life, right? It's like, "Oh, wait, this is a metaphor," right? So that actually tracks. But then I ran into a friend of mine who's a Hebrew scholar, and I was talking to her. I was like, "Can we talk about this? Can we talk about this correlation?" You know? And she said, "It's so funny that you mention that, because I've been researching lately, the Hebraic use of the good."

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jess: Turns out that what they meant when they talked about the good was creation, and I'm like, "Oh." So what that means, right? Is that we've always talked about our relationship with nature, right? And creation. And this idea of mastery, which I think it's like you master over something, but you also master an art. So then I was like, "Well, wait. We are here just the same as all of this. We just have this baggage of our particular kind of consciousness, you know? We have this baggage of ego, that we're working to transce- or to work in collaboration with spirit." But like, for me, it's like when I think about being in nature and being in creation, it is like you feel better, because you're literally spent... I mean, like, that's where you have the easiest access to the divine.

Sara: Yeah.

Jess: And also, like you're with your Creator. We're 80% water. That's what we are. We're mud and water.

Sara: Yeah. You know, on the one hand, I'm thinking about this post-Constantinian... You know, the, the church becomes part and parcel with the state, state religion, institutionalized, centuries ago, and we are products of that reality, our churches are, our people are. And you are very aware of the, I will say the devastation of that reality, like the, the way that it forms our Christian communities, our churches. And at the same time, you are endeavoring to start a Christian-

Jess: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... community. So very aware of, like, I would sense and Charles Bolling, who is your partner in this work-

Jess: Yeah.

Sara: ... approach this with great care-

Jess: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... how it is that you have both decided, like, it's still worth being a community in the way of Jesus Christ.

Jess: Right.

Sara: And that there's something out there that we approach as people who are cognizant of our egos, and also our desire to be in partnership and open to the spirit.

Jess: Absolutely. Yep.

Sara: So how do you go about kind of sussing out what is it we're trying to do and what is it we're trying to move away from in a really particular way?

Jess: I'm so glad you brought that up. So I, I had a conversation with my coach recently, so shout-out to coaching, specifically-

Sara: Woo-hoo!

Jess: ... to BJ.

Sara: Oh, he's so great.

Jess: But he made this passing comment. He's like, "You know, it's interesting. It's like you're both death doula and midwife in the church."

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jess: And I think a lot of new worshipping communities are, right now. I think that we're in this place where you can hear the spirit groaning, you can feel the spirit groaning. You know, even when you talk about statistics, nobody's really going to seminary, and those who are going to seminary are not going to work in the church. They're going to do other forms of ministry. People aren't going to church, you know, all those things, and I'm literally writing up a plan to get 200 three-year donors, you know?

Sara: Yeah.

Jess: We're building.

Sara: Yes.

Jess: And also firmly committed. I'm very active in the presbytery. I'm serving as interim at a church. I mean, I feel like that's part of where we are-

Sara: Okay.

Jess: ... because when I think about the institutional church, I feel like if you envision a, the foundation which was cracked, because it was started by Constantine-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jess: ... but it was cracked, right? It set up this false expectation, this false understanding about who God is, who Jesus is, and by extension, who we are, and when I think about that foundation, it's been cracked for almost 2,000 years. It is now breaking open. So, what I think about is breaking through it is the church that Jesus told us to establish. This is like talking to

Peter about starting my church. It's like he's talking about a way of being. Like, when he says, "I am the way," he's talking about a way of being, of living in right relationship with self and with neighbor. And so for us right now, where I feel like we are, it's like I feel like people in the church are very familiar with Jesus. People want to (laughs) follow Jesus, you know? I mean, it's not... I think people are also really confused, and lost, and scared.

Sara: Yeah.

Jess: And so I think for Charles and I, what we found is that we hit a point when we were like, "We don't know what this looks like, but we know we need to heal."

Sara: Okay.

Jess: Like, "We know that we need to get together. We need to be vulnerable with one another. We need to break bread with one another. And we need to be in silence and stillness together."

Sara: Okay.

Jess: Reflect on Scripture from a space of healing. And so our services are contemplative. We share communion every week, but we do so with big chunks of bread and juice boxes, because it was intended to be a meal.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jess: And then we share a meal.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jess: My feeling is that so many people in the institution right now are so tired, and are we tired enough to just say, "Let's just try something new"?

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jess: For me, when I think about my connection with the institution, it is as a way of inviting people into a new practice, into a way that is simpler. You know, like I'm serving as interim right now, and I keep saying to this congregation, who's like trying to figure out how to move through this time and all of this, you know? And they're doing so beautifully, but it's like, "Y'all, you can do new stuff." And not in a way that... I am an interim still, but it's like, "What do you want the church to be? Like, let yourselves dream."

Sara: Yeah.

Jess: Like, one of the things that's so hard is that the institution has robbed us of our imagination.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jess: And that's key to who we are, because that's how we create. I'm very committed to the conversation, to the invitation, and my focus is solely on that shoot that is breaking through the foundation, and how can we prepare ourselves, how can we be prepared, and help to bring this shoot into being?

Sara: I sense a lot of loving attention that you have toward people who are in this predicament-

Jess: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... toward us, our, the human predicament, of being captive to the imagination of the institutionalized church-

Jess: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... white supremacy, late stage capitalism, you know, that we, we are truly in service to our activities, our resources, our money, our time, are in service to this machine.

Jess: Mm-hmm.

Sara: You see the shoot, you see those green things breaking forth, and you're sheltering, and tending to it, and placing it in maybe a healthier soil (laughs)-

Jess: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... of, "Let's begin where we can begin, with loving attention."

Jess: Mm-hmm.

Sara: A long, loving look at what is real among us-

Jess: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... of feeding each other-

Jess: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... of listening to the words of Jesus with fresh eyes-

Jess: Yeah.

Sara: ... with open hearts, with open bodies. Like, that in of itself, if you were to endeavor to do those things, period-

Jess: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... is going to be, I think, a beautiful, healthy place for new things to thrive.

Jess: Right.

Sara: You know, in our lives.

Jess: Yeah.

Sara: And in the lives of the people who come to Every Table, and in the lives of the people who are in relationship with people who come to Every Table-

Jess: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ... as they're sent out.

Jess: Yeah, and one of the things that came to mind when you said that was, you know, the story of the rich young man who comes to Jesus, and he says, "What can I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus says, "Well, you know the commandments," you know? And he goes, and he says the second tablet of the 10 commandments, you know, which are those that have to deal with how we interact with our neighbors. And he says, "I've done all of those things since my youth," and Jesus says, "You lack one thing. Give away all that you own to the poor and follow me." And the man is sad, because he has many things, and so he goes away. And Jesus looks at him and loves him.

Sara: Yes.

Jess: And when I think of the institutional church, I think of that rich man.

Sara: Hmm.

Jess: Who has been very devout. He's like, "I'm doing all of the things I'm supposed to be doing."

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jess: "I am here."

Sara: "Every Sunday morning, in this beautiful place."

Jess: "And yet-

Sara: Yeah.

Jess: "... I just don't feel it." And it's also like if you're asking about eternal life, there's an indication of fear, right? It doesn't-

Sara: He knows-

Jess: ... give you certainty.

Sara: ... something's up.

Jess: He-

Sara: Yeah.

Jess: ... knows. And it fails. He's not healed or called.

Sara: Wow.

Jess: He cannot do it, because he cannot let go of his trust of his money. And when I think about the church, it's like can we trust God more than we trust our money? And what does that mean practically, you know? I mean, I think practically, if we're serious about it, I think it's like we talk about. We keep enough money for three years, and we give away the rest.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jess: If churches have enough money for three years, and maybe some churches have enough money for five years, and they want to help churches that have much smaller budgets with another, right?

Sara: Yeah.

Jess: We give it away, and we see what the Spirit can do. I think we, the fear that comes, right? It's like it's fear because we want to protect the institution, and we want to protect our jobs, which is reasonable, right? But what I found is also that, like, the Spirit provides, you know? Again, the congregation where I'm serving as interim does not have a lot of resources in terms of long-term. I think they're a very typical congregation in a whole lot of ways right now.

Sara: Yeah.

Jess: You know? And they're being very faithful with their building, you know? But it's like the things that keep showing up for them in these different ways, that are affirmations that they're going to be taken care of, like they're starting to see.

Sara: Yeah.

Jess: You know? That like, "Oh, this thing is provided in this way that we need. We do have the capacity to provide for one another." So then you start to build a certain level of trust there, and to sort of see your own collective power in the presence of the spirit, that really is there among us.

Sara: Collective power in the presence of the spirit.

Jess: Mm-hmm.

Sara: What seeds are you seeing in people's lives, those who come and partake in Every Table, in these practices? Or does it look much more subtle in some ways?

Jess: Sometimes, it looks more subtle. I think that there's more around a level of vulnerability and willingness, you know?

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jess: Like, starting a new community, sometimes folks will come once, and then you meet them for coffee, and that's how you know them-

Sara: Yes.

Jess: ... is through coffee, you know? You interact with them in those spaces. What I'm finding is that it's a steady growth. I'm finding it more overtly with Charles and I, specifically because that's the relationship that I see most presently, so as Charles and I are building this community together, you know, we spend time together, really just building life together, but in a really intentional, vulnerable way, in a way that is really geared toward healing. So we talk about vulnerable stuff, and this is for me. You know, I grew up upper middle class, white, East Texas. I went to Baylor. Charles grew up queer, black, lower class, in Richmond, Virginia, you know? And so, like, we grew up in very different contexts, and yet, it's been really beautiful, as we have started laying this foundation of vulnerability in this space, where it's like the people who come feel held in this space.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jess: And so then there's a different way of engaging. You know, we'll hear people talk about how they engage their roommates in different ways, or-

Sara: Yeah.

Jess: ... how they engage the stress of the world in different ways-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jess: ... or even just a deeper longing to find stillness. We sit in silence together every week, and Charles was out of town this week, and um, he typically leads meditation, so I was like, "Well, I'm just going to do... Are y'all good for like 20 minutes?" It was like 17 minutes or so, and they were like, "Yes." Going back to my 15 minutes of stillness that felt like it was overwhelming a couple years ago, it feels really exciting to be at a place where, like, there's a group of folks who are like, "No, we want to sit together in silence."

Sara: Yeah.

Jess: I mean, we have found fun connections happening in the city, so on a sort of manifestation level, it's been cool. Like, the different connections that we built, different relationships that we built with people here has been really exciting, that we're partnering with people who we're really honored to be able to partner with, who were also a little bit like, "They want to do that with us?" It's like, "Great." I mean, even things in terms of connecting with the networks, I would say that denominationally as well. Like, it's just been cool to see the different connection points that are being made.

Sara: I love what you all say, you communicate on Every Table's website, some of the values, some of the purposes behind this community, and that you "reject the distinction between the church and world. God is everywhere. God holds us, binds us by water. We are all one. We want to do more than talk to God. We want to hear God. We want to do more than preach the gospel. We want to live the gospel."

Jess: Mm-hmm.

Sara: I mean, I know you've heard that, because you know (laughs) it's your website. I'm struck by the simplicity of it, the directness of it.

Jess: Yeah.

Sara: And yet, how enlivening it feels to read those words on a church website, "We want to live gospel." Like, that's it, right?

Jess: You know-

Sara: (laughs).

Jess: ... you are the second pastor to say that to me in a week.

Sara: Wow.

Jess: I mean, like even in terms of like talking about the difference between thinking about something and really knowing something.

Sara: Yes.

Jess: You know, it's interesting, because there are so many things now that I, I feel like I know in my bones.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jess: In ways that, like, I didn't, I knew in my head before, you know? And I think that I had experienced God as an intellectual exercise-

Sara: Yeah.

Jess: ... until a couple years ago, and that's been actually the biggest shift, is that there really is no way. Like, God really is all that is, and we have access, because that means we are part of all that is, you know what I mean? (laughs).

Sara: Mm-hmm, yeah. I love the way that you embody that. Jess, is there anything exciting you want to share with us about Every Table?

Jess: That's such a great lead-in, that question. So we've realized... This was in conversation, but recently. It kind of came up, this idea of making a mobile meditation hub. There was basically an old bus for sale, and it was like, "Oh, wait. What if we have a, a mobile meditation hub? Like, our little traveling tabernacle, we take healing into the city. We're going to call it a moment, so we can go out, people can come in and sit, have like noise canceling headphones, be able to have space." I feel like even just share space with people-

Sara: Yeah.

Jess: ... but we're really, really excited about that, so thinking about how do we actually embody this?

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jess: And the other thing is that in September, we are actually going to have our first gathering of our cannabis ministry, which we are calling Highly Exalted. But it's going to be actually in partnership with a guy named Duron Chavis here in Richmond, who's doing stuff with Happily Natural Farms, and doing a lot of stuff around eco justice, land justice, particularly black land ownership, black farming. And so it's going to be in September. We're going to have a gathering

where we're going to prepare a meal together at one of his gardens, community gardens. It's a private garden space. Have somebody from Marijuana Justice come and talk about current decriminalization legislation stuff happening in Virginia, because it's in sort of a, a weird place. And then meditation, so exciting.

Sara: This might be our most radical podcast episode, just because of we're talking seriously about this cannabis ministry.

Jess: Mm-hmm.

Sara: But what I don't hear you saying is that, "We're just endeavoring to, you know, like totally lose sight of, you know, what the purpose is of this ministry," but this is an intentional offering to invite people into what it is that you're about.

Jess: Yes. It is very much around an exploration of sacred plant medicine. How do we approach it with respect? How do we approach it as part of nature and creation, with our own understanding? How do we also have a conversation? It's not saying that cannabis is for everyone. It's certainly an individual's choice, but I think when we talk about plant medicine, there is so much we don't know, and there is so much that can be offered. But I think especially as we talk about how do we integrate that into a spiritual practice, so we are very much taking it seriously. That's also just because I know the spirit's been opening up the way in these different ways, and so like, I'm trusting where she's leading. Yeah.

Sara: Jess, is there anything... For someone who's listening to this conversation with you, what practices would you invite someone in- into if they're just beginning this journey of mindfulness?

Jess: Yeah. I would say start by finding like a 15-minute meditation. I found it helpful at the beginning, to have a guided meditation. I listened to a lot of Tara Brach at the beginning. I mean, there are a whole lot of different people who do this. I listened to a lot of Ram Dass, brought a lot of Eastern philosophy here to the West throughout the '60s and '70s. So I would say find a meditation. Find something that you can be still or present with, and give yourself the chance to just, 15 minutes a day, step away. Even if you just sit outside and look around for 15 minutes.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jess: Leave your phone inside, but start there. I've actually... We've been talking about, um, doing body scans, like actually creating audio to then have for folks, or even doing, like, Instagram Live body scans, so also follow us at (laughs) EveryTable804 for future content, because that's definitely something that we're going to be creating. But I would say start by looking for a body scan. That'll just give you the chance to just learn to start to be present with your body, and then to come back to your body. And be outside in nature. Take your shoes off outside-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jess: ... in nature. Give your body the chance to connect with the ground.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jess: One other... And this is one thing, of like, don't be afraid-

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Jess: ... to actually ask the universe to show you something magical, right? So say like, "Show me who I am," or, "Show me something magical," but then be aware. You've got to be aware enough to look at, you know? You've got to be aware enough to then look for that response, because when you ask, what I've found is that as I've asked different questions, you know, like even just, "Show me what I really am," right? "Show me who I am," right? Then you'll start to realize, over time, the universe is there, offering you those things. But start by being still.

Sara: Awesome. Thank you so much, Jess. Thank you for being here.

Jess: Yeah, thank you. Thank you very much. This has been lovely. It's a really lovely conversation.