



The Welcome Table:
More with Gracie Payne
December 21, 2023



Transcript

Sara Hayden: You know, I think of the words of Willie James Jennings, who talks about this myth of the "finished man".

Gracie Payne: Mm.

Sara: We're taught, we're cultured and groomed to produce some version of ourselves as, like, this is what it means, as a goal of human life and community: to stand out, to be complete, to be...not beholden to need anyone else, but to be self operating in isolation like that. We have arrived here. We're finished and complete.

Gracie: Mm.

Sara: It's such a, to me, a very evocative image. I've heard you say before, "What you win them with is what you win them to", and I'm curious how you think about the "with" and the "to" in your planning.

Gracie: I think in mainline Protestantism, and especially in predominantly white affluent congregations, there is a real sense of, "I have to show up in these spaces sanctified," (laughs)

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Gracie: "...a hundred percent ready, as if I'm meeting my maker right now" or something. (laughs)

Sara: Mm.

Gracie: And that is not what the church is, right? We are a bunch of sinners stumbling after a gracious God. And I do want to create spaces where people feel freed up to be honest and to be seen. And, you know, I always come back to it, but the Springtide Research about people need to feel noticed, named and known, and we can't be known if we're hiding.

Sara: Mm.

Gracie: This is the rub I'm feeling in my ministry, and I'm open to feedback (laughs) from anyone on how to do this. But how do you create spaces that feel firm enough that people can stand on them and stretch on them, where they feel cared for and like someone's accountable for the space, but they also feel they don't have to perform?

And so, there is the sense of like, I want to pay attention to all the small details so that it feels like a gymnasium for them to play with their faith and community. But I also don't want it to feel so preciously put together that they can't tumble around and, maybe, break the vase or something. (laughs)

Sara: Yeah. Right. Right.

Gracie: I'm struggling with that, but I do have a sense – and it's more felt than researched – that if we can create spaces that do feel generous and open and where they're invited to show up fully because we've well prepared for them, people are a little braver in how they'll share themselves and how they'll receive another because they feel they've been well received,

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Gracie: ...I think.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Gracie: So, how do we not perpetuate that myth of the “finished self”?

Sara: Yeah. I want to pick up on what you just said about that line between how do we make it a free space for people, a liberating space

Gracie: Yeah.

Sara: ...where they could be embodied, be themselves, and maybe are even encouraged, prompted, or yearning to show more of their whole selves, rather than that polished, finished version.

Gracie: Mm-hmm.

Sara: And the beautiful image I saw when I looked at the welcome table, like literally the table that was set in the parlor that day, I was drawn to. I mean, it was set with beautiful plates, and (laughs) it was set like a Thanksgiving meal to me, like a special dinner. And yes, I would want to tell my kids to like, not knock everything over if you – I mean, you know, my kids. But I think it's also a place where they would yearn to be at. It just marked it not to me as ostentatious or delicate, but as real.

It actually makes me think of this prayer that Ben always prays when he prays before our dinner, if he volunteers to pray, and he's in a good mood about it, he'll pray. And one of the things he always says is, "Thank you, God, for letting us be alive."

Gracie: Whew.

Sara: I think quite literally, he is grateful for the gift of life of not being dead.

Gracie: (laughs)

Sara: He's grateful to be alive. And I think that's what he means. What you're saying is making me think about that prayer. And the idea of, like, letting us come alive and not be these sanitized versions of ourselves, or these edited versions of ourselves,

Gracie: Mm.

Sara: ...but to be spontaneous and embodied, which is not something that I often associate with the white Protestant church, but they are things that I've experienced in my white Protestant life.

So, (laughs) and I think you and I share a long history. You and I grew up in the same church,

Gracie: Yeah.

Sara: ...a new church together. We go way, way back,

Gracie: Yeah.

Sara: ...and those experiences at Grace Covenant and, you know, we were fortunate to be a part of a church pastored by very, very creative pastors, among them, Jay McKell, who always did it up (laughs)

Gracie: Yeah.

Sara: ...in worship, sometimes scrutinized by the Presbytery, for having, popping a cork of champagne at Easter.

Gracie: (laughs) And that's when I knew joy mattered. Joy matters to God. Yeah. (laughs)

Sara: Mm-hmm. And we would throw confetti on Easter. And all the children would scramble around under the chairs and pews to gather it up and stuff it in our pockets and take it home with us. And every once in a while, like, throughout the year, you'd open a hymnal and you'd see like that square, bright, blue piece of confetti, uh, these just signifiers that life is a celebration, and the life of faith is a celebration.

And that was a very pivotal experience for me personally, as a person of faith, as a human, and as someone who was drawn into ministry, I think, partly because of, like, that mattered more to me than other things.

Gracie: Yeah.

Sara: And there were other things that I could have done.

Gracie: Mm-hmm.

Sara: It felt like, in worship, the lens I was invited into, in Christian community and in worship at Grace Covenant, was the primary lens

Gracie: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ...for my life.

Gracie: Absolutely. And I am so grateful that I grew up in a setting where I – I got to feel, with all of my senses, that the gospel of Jesus Christ matters. (laughs)

I think about the fact that I was in a setting where I did the Crop Walk one week, right, and then due to family struggles that I was experiencing, the person a few pews behind us showed up at our door with groceries for Christmas, so we would be able to make our Christmas meal.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Gracie: And then a few months after that, I'm invited to dance in worship before Easter, and there's confetti. And, and then is there, like, a more symbolic act of recognizing that each of us matter, in the telling of the story of God, than the flowering of the cross

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Gracie Payen: ...where each person arrives is given that flower, brings it from their own garden? So the things we're growing in our own lives,

Sara: Mm.

Gracie: ...we're bringing as an offering and placing on the cross to help tell the story

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Gracie: ...of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, and liberation of the world. Like, the details that were attended to in the arc of the liturgical year,

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Gracie: ...it trickled down into how we practiced our faith.

And going back to what we were talking about earlier, it's, we're communicating to people that they matter by showing such intention around the details and saying, "This matters. The Gospel of God matters (laughs) and the work that the church can do in the world matters. And so, we're gonna take this seriously. We're gonna set out the real plates and we're gonna get the confetti."

And, I think about all the big moments in my life and people were, you know, like showed up. They took it seriously.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Gracie: They felt invited, they felt engaged. And you know, it was in that same parlor that Sam blessed me after my ordination, right?

Sara: Hmm.

Gracie: Your son. And that's because that moment, right, in ordination is treated as important. And, and so I want to treat the spiritual moments in people's life, like a moment such as "I'm new to this church and I want to connect", that is a huge step to take.

So I think it's important that we treat it like it matters

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Gracie: ...by getting a floral arrangement, if we can, (laughs) you know,

Sara: Yes.

Gracie: ...or grabbing flowers from the garden and putting them on the table.

Sara: Yes.

Gracie: It doesn't have to be a very expensive endeavor, but there are little ways that we can communicate "This matters."

Sara: Yes.

Gracie: "This is holy ground that we are standing on, both with our words, but also implicitly with how we prepare."

Sara: Beautifully said.

Sara: You have always treated Sam with reverence, my children with reverence, and you invited them to your ordination and to the party before your ordination, and they knew that it was

important in the celebration. You were important to them and are important to them. So, just those little investments in people's lives, it takes a great deal of attention, of loving attention.

That's the stuff that you do that, among many things that I marvel at, of just this relentless (laughs)

Gracie: (laughs)

Sara: ...noticing of people: "I saw you." You want to meet the person that popped in that one Sunday and let them know that you saw that they were there, and you want to know what's going on in their lives. You want to know them.

I think that's absolutely one of the main reasons people are returning, because the link between their random or intentional or like, "I'll just show up. I don't really know why I feel like going to church today", or "I've been looking for this place, this community", and the capaciousness of the conversation that follows that you set up with them.

Gracie: Yeah. I think it's the Spirit's nudging that allows an encounter to happen, let's say, on a Sunday morning, when someone has bravely (laughs)

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Gracie: ...walked through the doors in a new place and placed themselves in a vulnerable position in many ways. All of us are vulnerable at worship, but I think we especially feel it those first Sundays in a new community.

And so, when the Spirit allows us to encounter one another, and we meet, or they feel that nudge to share contact information, I just think we're a part of this really holy dialogue, and so we need to take seriously, as pastors, and as any leaders in the church, our call to participate in that moment and be responsive to the Spirit, bringing that person into the community.

And then, yeah, I mean, I, I try to ensure that I am a pastor in that time and asking the questions that others may not ask, right?

Sara: Mm.

Gracie: Like, "What is God doing in your life?"

And I'll confess, I had a dinner with a couple, like, a couple months ago, and it still sticks out to me because we got to the end of the dinner and Christian was like – my husband – he said, "you didn't really tend to the Holy." (laughs)

Sara: (laughs)

Gracie: I was like, "Oh, you are so right. It was missed. It was missed."

Sara: What did he mean by that, do you think?

Gracie: He felt like I really stayed on the surface with them,

Sara: Mm.

Gracie: ...around what was happening. Like, there were lots of events happening in their life.

Sara: Yeah.

Gracie: You know, they were recently married, et cetera, et cetera, and I didn't ask the questions that he often witnesses and others may witness me asking of, "Well, how did Christ meet you there in that moment?" Or

Sara: Mm.

Gracie: "How did you see the face of God in that person?" Or, you know, whatever it might be that's appropriate to the moment. But when I didn't do it, it was noticeable. (laughs) And, and I still think about it because I think, man, I've wondered, do I send them a card? Do I say, "Let's try that again."

Sara: Mm.

Gracie: "I want to hear what's going on in your life." Really? And I think it's the "really". A lot of hinges on the "really" in our faith, the asking of "Where are you really?"

Sara: Yeah.

Gracie: "Why are you here, really?" (laughs)

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Gracie: Which I think Howard Thurman really started that practice of, "Why are you here, really?"

Sara: Yeah. Wow.

Gracie: Because I think that's part of our call.

Sara: Yeah. And you know, I have been, I'm certainly culpable of staying surface level in conversations where, like, looking backwards, you're like, "What did I think was at risk

Gracie: Oh.

Sara: "...to bring God into the conversation?" Especially this person, like whether they were like, at worship, you know, in the same place with me, or they know that faith is this lens in my life.

What do we think is going to happen?

Gracie: Yeah.

Sara: And is it worse than endeavoring to ask the question and let the person honestly respond

Gracie: Mm-hmm.

Sara: ...where they're at, and to hold that space with them? If they say, "I don't know how Christ has shown up in my life in that moment."

Gracie: Yeah, yeah.

Sara: That's an okay answer. (laughs) Whatever the answer.

Gracie: If they've risked, right?

Sara: Mm.

Gracie: Like, if they've risked to meet me for a meal

Sara: Yeah.

Gracie: ...or to show up at worship, and why would I not risk with them?

Sara: Mm.

Gracie: Like, let's leap together. (laughs)

Sara: Mm.

Gracie: And the other teaching, right, that comes out of most people's clinical pastoral education is the teaching of, "They're going to take the conversation where they want it to go.

Sara: Mm.

Gracie: "And we just companion them."

And so, when they don't want to take that left turn that you've invited them (laughs) to take by asking, you know, "How did Christ meet you here" or whatever it may be, they're not going to take it. They'll move another way. And that's okay.

Sara: Yeah.

Gracie: I think I fear that I'm going to take the risk, and the relationship's going to rupture,

Sara: Mm.

Gracie: ...but it's not. (laughs)

Sara: (laughs)

Gracie: Because, right, like, it's the conflict in that moment, and how we handle it, that is going to build

Sara: Hmm.

Gracie: ...the relationship and the connection, because we'll learn about each other through it. So if they say, "I didn't see God there." Well, now we're getting somewhere, right?

Sara: Mm.

Gracie: Like, it's like the person who sat in my office after attending for a year and said, "I'm really struggling with the Trinity because I don't believe in Jesus."

And I was like, "Ah, now we're getting somewhere." (laughs)

Sara: (laughs) Yeah.

Gracie: "Okay."

Sara: Yeah.

Gracie: "You're not gonna turn left. We're gonna turn right. Let's see where this leads us." If I don't show up in risk, then why am I asking people to be vulnerable?

Sara: Mm. I love that.

Gracie: Yeah. Yeah.

Sara: What encouragements do you have, if any, for folks in the church who feel like they just wish for that one person to step into the sanctuary, (laughs)

Gracie: (laughs)

Sara: ...that one new person? It feels so high stakes that, like, we know in a lot of settings – maybe the majority of ministry settings – a new visitor is a rare thing.

Gracie: Mm.

Sara: What would you do in their shoes?

Gracie: Yeah. Well, Peter Block says, “To welcome the stranger is to welcome the strange things they do,”

Sara: Okay. (laughs)

Gracie: And so I would give that encouragement to many churches

Sara: Hmm.

Gracie: ...of, like, “Okay, if you want to welcome the stranger, you're going to welcome strange practices (laughs) into the church, right, or strange and holy conversations. So are you willing to do that?”

And I think that gets back to being a good guest. Like, they may be a guest among you at worship

Sara: Mm.

Gracie: ...or whatever the event is, but you're really the guest in the spiritual conversation that they're having with God.

Sara: Wow.

Gracie: And so, how do you listen and invite them to respond to whatever you're sensing the Spirit is doing as well and, and naming and blessing them, um, right where they are, I think is essential.

I think it was Robert Dykstra, one of my professors in seminary, who made a point about, he was talking about premarital counseling with us and teaching us about it, but he was also talking at the end more broadly. And he said, "Don't get to the end of the premarital session without saying the ways in which you see God's love alive in them."

Sara: Mm.

Gracie: And then he said, "And in fact, just do that all the time in your ministry." (laughs) And I think that's good practice, right?

Sara: Mm.

Gracie: So, there's always a way in which God's love is alive in another person. And we, I think, can name that for others. That's part of our witness as the church. We have a particular gift for that.

And so doing that, making it weird,

Sara: (laughs)

Gracie: ...and then, (laughs) I think you said the one person who shows up that they're like, "Oh, finally, this guest." I think you have to be okay with things not being perfect.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Gracie: We all start somewhere, and it's in the starting and in the building that we experience God. So the project, (laughs) if you will, of being the church, and, saying, "Okay, we don't really have any young adults here"

Sara: Yeah. Yeah.

Gracie: I'm going to use that as an example since that's my primary ministry area at Second Presbyterian Church. And, but, we have some

Sara: (laughs)

Gracie: ...or, we have one.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Gracie: And affirming that and celebrating that, and then saying, "We're just going to get started" in building relationships, in building opportunities for us to serve alongside each other, and know that ultimately we are not building programming. We are building disciples of Jesus Christ who live in community with one another in a way that offers a witness to a watching world.

Sara: Amen.

Gracie: The programming is not it. (laughs) I just always come back to that. It's a container. It's just a container. And so, if we can not measure our success by our containers

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Gracie: ...and how big they are and how impressive they are and how well flowered they are, (laughs)

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Gracie: ...but instead by those who are carrying it, who are in it, who are seeking God through it, that's ministry.

And when I can keep my mind clear on that,

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Gracie: ...I find so much more joy in the work, and I find Christ more readily (laughs) in the work. I see his face more regularly

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Gracie: ...because I'm not just attuned to the measuring stick mentality

Sara: Wow.

Gracie: ...that comes with, I think, the church's history.

Sara: Yeah. And then that beautiful invitation that you have offered all of us, of being a guest in someone's story, and pointing to, what was it that you said? The "How God's love lives in them." You know, what a beautiful invitation to anyone listening here, whether it's trepidatiously, it's the first time, or it's something that you do regularly, and whoever it is, it doesn't have to happen in the container of a church program.

Gracie: Yes

Sara: ...but even better, to have it happen along the road with someone you love and care about to notice a name.

Gracie: Yeah, and we get to do that when we're more flexible with our containers. We have the time, the space to do it. And that's – I think it's Ministry Architects who teach about the concept of programming is just the rent you pay to do the ministry. (laughs)

Sara: Hmm. Wow.

Gracie: ...that we do that so that people see that there's something happening here. Right?

Sara: Mm-hmm. Wow.

Gracie: And, and hopefully those containers are in fact, where something's happening, going back to our earlier conversation. But, really, the ministry happens in the in-between. And I don't mean that it doesn't happen in the containers; it does and it should, but that's just one place.

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Gracie: And so recognizing that it's the relationships that are built there, it's when people are swapping phone numbers at the end of the event and getting together later and supporting one another through seasons of loss and joy and helping one another answer the call of God in their lives, that that's the fruit. (laughs)

Sara: Mm-hmm. Yes. This conversation has been a lot of fun, very meaningful, instructive, formational. I'm so thankful you had the time to sit down with us. I'm thankful, those who've listened, who are inviting some of these concepts and perspectives that, Gracie, you've mentioned into their life and practice. Thanks.

Gracie: Well, I am thankful to get to do ministry alongside you, Sara, and the ways that the conversations that you're having are encouraging and spurring all of us on as we seek to follow God together. So thank you.