

Vanessa: Dennea, it's so good to be with you. Thanks for joining us.

Dennea: Yeah. Great to be with you guys as well.

Todd: Hey, Dennea.

Dennea: Hey, great to be with you guys.

Vanessa: So great to be with you today. I'm going to jump right in here if that's all right. Dennea, if you wouldn't mind just sharing with us a little bit about the specific type of justice work that you're involved in and a little bit of how you came to this work in the first place.

Dennea: Yes. So I grew up in Phoenix, Arizona. My mom's family immigrated from Honduras and my dad's family is from the East Coast. And I think throughout my journey being raised in the church both with a Spanish speaking grandma who was part of this bilingual Pentecostal church and then going to very different contexts with my dad and my family. I noticed early on the ways in which immigrants, especially in Phoenix, were viewed, looked down upon, talked to, and talked about. And really early on I noticed that there's a lot of disconnect between Christians who believe this gospel of grace and their ability to then love people different from them. And so a lot of the divisions we were witnessing this past year, I remember noticing in elementary school as a kid.

Dennea: And so I think God has gripped my heart at a young age for reconciliation and unity and made it really clear that's such a huge part of what Christ is doing. And then I just was able to be exposed through middle school and high school and coming out of high school into my 20s to really great work happening among the poor and felt a strong call to spend my ministry in those spaces. So I helped plant the church that my husband is the lead pastor at now as well as helping other churches get going doing some work overseas in Tanzania, East Africa with orphanages and church planters. And then I ended up coming back to Phoenix because I met my husband and we got married. And so I ended up finding myself rooted in this city that I wasn't planning on being at post high school and really just wrestling with the state of the church.

Dennea: And what does it look like for God's people to be equipped for justice and mercy? And so I initially got involved working with all the different pastors that my husband was connected to related to foster care and doing teaching on reconciliation. And what does it look like to help church members to value biological families and think about family reunification and take a different approach to foster care through a justice lens? And then even in that work that was very specific, it kept coming back to the church and how it specifically needs to be equipped for all kinds of issues in our city. And so about eight years ago there was a group of about 35 pastors and churches that had formed a network that was doing theological training, pastor equipping, church planting--things that pastor networks do.

Dennea: And it was beginning to be cross denominational and they wanted it to be multi-ethnic. So they hired me full time. And these last eight years I've been leading that network.

And a lot of the work that we've been doing has been creating curriculum training tables that can help church members go on this journey where they're able to really understand how much of our worldview and our practices are shaped towards alienation and exclusion. And then what does it look like as God's people to lean in towards belonging? And so through that we've done a lot on payday lending, immigration reform. We're incubating something right now for criminal justice reform. They're really trying to help people both learn but then very experientially know their neighbors who've had very different backgrounds or situations. And then to get actively involved in pursuing justice, not just ideologically but in their day-to-day habits and lives.

Todd: And that right there is why she's a guest.

Vanessa: That's wonderful, wonderful work.

Todd: So Dennea that's that background I was saying a moment ago that I admire and respect so much. And I'm wondering if you can leverage some of that background for beginners. At The Center here, we're really hoping to get beginners into this conversation. And you read about nones and dones and skeptics and to maybe help get them back into this game. So with all that experience you have, how would you describe the number one challenge for getting church leaders or churches into conversations about justice, race, et cetera?

Dennea: I would answer that two ways. I think if they're a church that's made up of people who already are bought into a worldview of justice, the biggest challenge is moving it from a place of intellectual conversion. Where there's a heart for it, where there's anger, outrage, compassion--all of these emotions and experiences and opinions but their life still isn't patterned around justice and mercy. And so when we've been working with the leaders who were really thankful for the journey they'd been on over the last 10 years or two years and what they've shed that's not helpful for their spirituality, what they've picked up. If in that they're not also deconstructing individualism and consumerism, it becomes this new identity where you can still have a lot of opinions that I think are pretty spot on and right and righteous but there's not a practice toward doing justice and mercy or walking with the vulnerable. Because when you do that, you're then able to be oriented toward peacemaking and reconciliation because you realize this world is way more complex than a couple of buckets can fit people in, categorically. So that's been the biggest challenge the last two years with people who I really have felt are wanna be allies, are trying to be allies, wanna be engaged in the work. But not through a lens of peacemaking and not through the heart of reconciliation which requires a lot of endurance and I think spiritual depth to be able to do long-term. On the other side of it, maybe in the more conservative settings have been all the boogeymans that evangelicals have inherited. 90 years ago or 50 years ago there were these things that attack the gospel and we don't really know fully what they were. But we have this family history memory of something bad that happened. And so the tendency to move slowly and to pace ourselves in trying to get out of a burning building (laughs) is very hard. It's like, we're not talking about pacing ourselves and building something new. A lot of times it's pacing ourselves in naming what's really broken and being more honest about our

history. And so the fear sets in, and I think a resurgence of fundamentalism in both spaces but especially the space that's very hesitant to engage in this.

Dennea: And so that's been a challenge to think about how do we pull people into relationships so that they can begin to have these conversations with people very different from them and begin to have different ways of looking at it. And really reduce some of the fear and anxiety around where we land on certain issues and what that means for our future or even the generational differences that are emerging.

Vanessa: I think what you're talking about, Dennea, is such an embodied faith. And it reminds me of how close Jesus would get to people when we read in the gospels. And the ability to touch and the ability to look into someone's face. So when we talk about engaging this work from a posture that looks like Jesus, we need that healing touch, God's healing touch and renewal in the deepest parts of ourselves. And we can't find that in communities of color when we're rubbing up against one another. And so I'm curious for you, Dennea, how this kind of healing work has played out in your own life and then how it manifests in the work that you do with the Surge Network?

Dennea: I think a lot of my work the last 15, 16 years has been in spaces that have felt very hostile to me being there. Predominantly just spaces not ready to really engage on racial reconciliation, justice, and the area of gender. Trying to walk through what it looks like to really authentically love these leaders, these pastors when I have a lot of internal conflicts happening as I'm in these spaces.

Vanessa: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dennea: And noticing how easy it is for me to become cynical or self-righteous or to categorize people based on a word they use or a sentence or where they land on something. And just recognizing that that is such a consistent practice of the flesh. And when we've come from a place of being marginalized or being overlooked or even wounded unrighteously, unjustly, it can be easy to actually justify unrighteous behaviors in return as a way of protecting ourselves. And so, at the same time, we don't want to just say, let's not have any boundaries or any sense of what it means to be respected in these spaces. How to hold those two things was just a really long journey of seeking out older, saints to help shape me.

Vanessa: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dennea: And of course prayer and healing and really understanding how to anchor myself in who God made me to be in an environment that often felt like a furnace to me. And then to also not just stay in these furnaces but also want to see them over time become beloved communities. So wondering if this furnace that feels very hostile to my very being over time can become a place of depth and intimacy and community as we create tables where new people can join and old people can repent. The original people can repent and stay or they can move on. What does that look like systemically when you're

working within institutions like local churches or denominations or church planting networks?

Dennea: And so I think that's been a big part of it and then trying to really wrestle with the concept of enemy love. And I think that phrase gets thrown around a lot in relation to political disagreements. But especially going through this last five or six years, there's this level of hostility towards certain people groups. And what does it look like to resist that hostility with a real depth of love and friendship and pursuit and boundaries and education and building awareness. And so I've mostly learned by failing miserably through the whole process (laughs) and just having so many cycles.

Dennea: Especially early in leadership where I would just be so confronted with how easy it is to play the same games that are destroying my own community or the people that I care about and love. And I think there was a real paradigm shift for me. At some point, our church was going through a lot of division. We're a multi-ethnic church. It was going through a lot of division in 2015 around Black Lives Matter and then the election in 2016 and realizing that there was a lot of ugly behaviors coming toward my husband and how easy it was to be ugly in return. And just realizing "what is the goal here--to be right or is it to really begin to be the aroma of Christ to this particular issue." There's a particular calling we have right now in the midst of racial reconciliation and justice.

Dennea: But what is our outcome that we really are praying God would do? Post 2016 we've had a long journey of prayer and repentance. And we don't want to be victims in this space, we really want to see God restore and heal.

Vanessa: Hmm. So good.

Todd: I hear Dennea saying, uh, a couple of things that I think are a little scary and take some courage. The first is to enter spaces that aren't intuitively generous takes courage.

Vanessa: Yeah.

Todd: I could enter into certain Asian spaces because my wife's half Japanese. So I could enter into a Japanese space and probably feel somewhat okay.

Vanessa: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Todd: But to maybe enter into a Vietnamese space or any other sort of cultural ethnic space, it does feel like it takes some courage.

Vanessa: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Todd: But what I hear the Dennea saying is the courage it takes to become the kind of person who could routinely do that feels every bit as fundamental and it takes a lot of courage to confront that in yourself.

Vanessa: Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. I would agree with that 100%.

Todd: So Dennea, we were interested in some of the thoughts from your dissertation and one of them was your use of the concept of confession.

Dennea: Hmm.

Todd: We normally think of confession as something like, "Yes, mommy, I had my hand in the cookie jar. Yes, Officer. I was, I was speeding." But you talk about it with reference to healing and transformation and how confession works in the arenas of justice and peace. Can you explain that to our listeners?

Dennea: One of the things I've realized, mostly through parenting and then how God sometimes uses these pictures from kids to reveal more of our childlike faith that he's calling us to, is just how often the framework of sin and confession and guilt that frames a lot of our paradigm or understanding of exposing sin or revealing sin rests on this idea that God is this parent who already knows everything you did. So you just had to suck it up, tell him and then you're forgiven, you're declared not guilty and now you're righteous. And when you think about that in the context of a family, there's so much more going on. When our kids, when a child has done something that's harmed themselves or someone else, the goal isn't just exposure for the sake of exposure.

Dennea: It's not even just exposure for the sake of them not doing it again but there really is a desire for them to understand what was lost or what was missed or what is beauty that was turned away from in order to pursue whatever a seven year old or four year old is throwing a tantrum around. And so when you think about, what I thought about confession in relation to our own church community in downtown Phoenix, it's like, there's actually this incredible gift and grace given to us in confession. It's really an act of real intimacy and vulnerability between us and God and us and one another. And it's less like sucking it up and telling dad what you did after dinner because you've been in time out for two hours and you want to get it over with.

Dennea: And he knows whether you tell him or not--it's not quite that. It's much more like dad's just sitting on the edge of the bed waiting for you and wants you to pull the covers down so he can give you a hug so you can tell him what happened. And you guys can talk about what went wrong and the truth. The most important part of confession is it opens us up to receive God's truth about us, about our neighbors and about the world. And I think as we were going through a lot of division across African-American, Latino and White groups of leaders within our church, I realized even in my own journey, my own story, people I had been working on lifelong forgiveness toward that there was a part of me that doesn't want to know God's truth about someone who's an enemy or someone I had a breach of trust with or I feel betrayed by.

Dennea: I like having this distance and the separation. And even that, I think that's a part of confession we can easily rush through. So that's wrong, so therefore I'm confessing it.

There's actually this process of sitting with reality. Confession is really just naming reality. The reality is I don't really want to love this person. And I think a lot of times we get lost in guilt and shame over that as opposed to confession being, let's just name what it is and trust God is big enough to sit with us in that and, and restore and heal and it might be a month, it might be three years. But we can trust that God's goodness is big enough to carry us through that. And so looking at it there's again in our culture the tendency to have individual confession.

Dennea: And that can get very abstract very quickly. But when we try to build it within a community, we can begin to get very concrete and name behaviors and motives and attitudes without assigning shame or this need to rush through it. But really we're learning how to name reality to each other and then speak God's mercy and grace to one another in ways that I think knit community together in ways nothing else can. And so I think that's a big, big piece of the work that we've been trying to do in terms of helping communities to learn how to relate deeper to each other. 'Cause we don't just want people living at peace at a shallow level, we really want this depth of communion. You can't have that depth without the ability to speak what's true to one another.

Vanessa: So much of what I hear you saying Dennea, comes back to a trauma model--rupture and hurt and harm comes to us in the context of relationship. Therefore the reconciliation, the repair, must also be entered into in a relational way as well. And that can't happen--that repair and that restoration--without the naming of that reality. And it's such a tension, right? That we hold and that we live into which is very much kingdom like, right? It's the already and the not yet and being in the midst of that tension.

Dennea: Yeah.

Todd: Yeah. When I was thinking about Dennea's work on confession and you talked about it as a path toward or a bridge toward improved solidarity--I was thinking of, as Dennea alluded to, the fundamental Greek term for confession means to come into agreement with. I think about all the layers to come into agreement and self knowledge. To come into an agreement maybe relationally with what's true or real as Dennea said And then to come into agreement with God about myself feels really fundamental. I'm grateful for that insight.

Vanessa: And to come into agreement with God about my relationship with another person or another people group.

Dennea: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I think one of the things we've talked a lot about with pastors and leaders is the presence of defensiveness about any possible sin in our generational history or in our own lives is usually an indicator that the enemy is at work in pretty powerful ways. 'Cause as Christians, the ability to name areas of brokenness and ways we've harmed each other, that's an incredible gift we have with the gospel to be able to speak of it and, and desire to repair because of the grace that has been bestowed on us through Christ. When there's this cultural season of defensiveness distancing all the

energy being poured into saying, "Oh, no, there isn't this historic or individual sin present."

Dennea: Usually that's a sign of the enemy who's the author of fear and deception. Because the truth is that actually being able to name it is very liberating. Because when we name it, we discover the face of a God who intimately loves us in light of that. And weaves into community with the very things that we're naming that cause so much harm to another and allows us to be restored as brothers and sisters in Christ. And so it is interesting that the very thing we're resisting so much, which is confession of sin, whether it's corporate or individual or systemic, is one of the key first steps towards greater healing with each other.

Vanessa: Yeah. I love what you're saying about--it alleviates the shame when I can see what is being presented to me as an invitation toward really mutual liberation. And we've already talked about a beloved community--what it would look like to enter into that and come to the table. It's just a beautiful picture and a reimagining of what the invitation is that God invites us to. What I wanted to talk to you about is you've written a book called *Healing Prayers and Meditations to Resist a Violent World*. And I am a sucker for a good lament prayer. But in there you mentioned the specific practices of repentance and lament. And I'm quoting now, "They are the inner work necessary to engage long term in the ministry of justice and reconciliation in ways that reflect Jesus." And so I wanted to ask you because we don't see a lot of lament in the church today as a spiritual practice. And I'm curious why you think that is.

Dennea: I think it's hard. There's just so much privilege that we're sitting with you in all spaces--even just socioeconomically. Even in the poor neighborhoods that we're ministering in, the ideology of individualism and acquiring--even getting out of poverty to become wealthy--there's just such a strong ideology in the American story that crosses political parties. It crosses ethnicities, it crosses socioeconomics.

Todd: Yeah.

Dennea: That this is what the good life looks like. And I think it's very hard to live into lament when that is what's shaping your worldview as opposed to the kingdom of God. So that will be one thing that, in the work we've been doing of trying to say what does it look like to really have eyes to see the kingdom of God in our midst. And then where there's those gaps, lament becomes a way of sustaining the already not yet that exists. I think it's also very hard because we don't have depth of community and there's been so much erosion of community. Even now COVID has impacted that. And so much of people's spiritual journeys are happening in isolation.

Dennea: Maybe they're following someone on Twitter or a podcast and there might be great content but it's still not in physical community where you're saying, what does this mean? How do we wrestle with this for our time, our place? What God's calling us in this little neighborhood corner of our neighborhood. So just that isolation and lack of community makes lament difficult. When you look at it through scripture, it's always

happening communally, right? It's happening through God's people together. And so lament alone very quickly becomes something much, much more like despair or discouragement. And so I think our life isn't set up for it. And the resources we have for it in the historic black church--a lot of what's come out of Latin America, even Latin American worship--it's just off the radar of the broader Protestant or evangelical churches.

Dennea: And so I think that disconnect makes it really hard. There are resources that have been developed through generations of oppression and suffering in the midst of a lot of the other people, who a lot of other people who proclaim the name of Christ who were causing the oppression and injustice. And because we haven't repented, we haven't been able to access these gifts that are present in the church on the margins.

Todd: Dennea, at the end of Peace Talks, we like to ask our guests a final question and it comes out of our deep respect and admiration for the spaces and places in which you work.

Dennea: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Todd: How are you finding God mediating hope to you these days? And it could be anything, it could be a replenishing physical exercise, a poem, a song. But it's just seems hard, like you said, lament is difficult. It can be easy to lose hope. How's God giving you hope today?

Dennea: Yeah. It's interesting because coming out of 2020, the first half of the year, I kept saying to everyone, it feels like the world's ready for us to go fast and I still wanna go slow.

Dennea: I'm not ready to go fast. And yet we get to the summer and I'm like, "Oh, no, I'm going fast like everybody else." (laughs) I'm surprised by how exhausted life feels right now. Even eight months into 2021--we're almost at the end. And so for me, God has continued to bring real joy to me through beginning to see leaders of color--African-American and other multi-ethnic leaders--step into spaces where they're really able to lead and create and initiate. And to begin to say, "Hey, we're not gonna have those conversations anymore. We're gonna do this." And so when I've had a lot of experiences in my work where I'm sitting in a room that may still be multiethnic but the conversation has changed.

Vanessa: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dennea: And it's just this real moment of joy. God is doing something really new. And I'm sure it's really discouraging and hard to be in majority White spaces for any number of reasons right now. But there's this new birth, new life that's happening. And leaders who'd been on the margins and kind of scattered are working together and the questions have changed. The kinds of things we want to do together have changed. The audience has changed and I have experienced the most intense joy in the last four months in the midst of all my normal spiritual discipline practices.

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Dennea: I could not write the book I wrote a year ago right now. Because everything feels so exhausting and spent. And yet these tastes of beloved community that have grown over 10 or 20 years of hardship together feels like another world. It feels like new heavens new earth kind of stuff. I don't know that that could have emerged after a year. But seeing Christian men and women from a lot of different diverse backgrounds and denominations begin to have depth of relationship around God's mission really seems like we're experiencing something new. I keep capturing those moments throughout my day or week. This is joy. This is really something beautiful emerging in the midst of a lot that seems to be burning right now.

Vanessa: Forged by fire.

Todd: Yeah.

Vanessa: I like that.

Todd: Well, thank you Dennea. You're wonderful--amazing qualities of being in the work of God--and you give us hope.

Dennea: Yeah.

Todd: Yeah.

Dennea: Okay.

Todd: Thank you.

Dennea: Thanks. So great to be with you guys.

Vanessa: So great to be with you too.