

Engage360 Episode 131 | Living Godspeed and the Power of Being Known; Reverend Matt Canlis

[00:00:00] **Don Payne:** Hi friends. We want to welcome you again to Engage360 here at Denver Seminary. My name is Don Payne. I'm one of your hosts and I'm joined by my co-host, Dr. Eva Bleeker, who directs the pastoral counseling and chaplaincy programs here at Denver Seminary. Eva, always a pleasure to sit across the table from you.

[00:00:34] **Eva Bleeker:** Agreed.

[00:00:35] **Don Payne:** Let me introduce our guest for this episode with some words that in his own way, he embodies them, or at least redefines them. The two words are radical and power. And I'll come back to that with him. Reverend Matt Canlis is the lead pastor of Trinity Church in Wenatchee, Washington. And Matt tells a very compelling story through a short film that he produced entitled Godspeed. Now, I've watched it twice and Eva uses it in one of her courses and she probably has it memorized and could carry on a conversation using lines from it as some of us can with favorite movies. Is that close to true?

[00:01:16] **Eva Bleeker:** It's close to true. Although I will say no matter how many times I view the film, I find that I need it again. It is that compelling in my spiritual practice and so I'm delighted to be in conversation with you today.

[00:01:29] **Don Payne:** Yeah, Matt, thanks for taking time to be with us.

[00:01:32] **Matt Canlis:** I'm happy to be with you. This is the middle of the day here in the parish. It's a welcome break from regular routine. Most of what I do is pretty routine, so this is fun.

[00:01:45] **Don Payne:** Oh, good. Yeah, routines are great things. Well, in his film, Godspeed, Matt chronicles his personal journey of becoming a pastor while he and his wife Julie lived in Scotland some years ago and ministry turned out to be quite different than what he expected, and we want to learn from him about that and I want to whet your appetite for even more. Matt is also the author of a book called Backyard Pilgrim 40 Days at Godspeed. Matt, first, what do you mean by Godspeed? Explain the title of the film.

[00:02:21] **Matt Canlis:** Sure. One of the misnomers is that people think Godspeed is about simply slowing down. The truth is, we move at different speeds. As Isaiah teaches, there's a time to fly, and to run, and to walk. And so, we didn't want people just to chill out and slow down. But we did want people to think about what it means to move at the pace of being known. So, Godspeed's also a confession. It's not that this is something I have mastered or people I'm walking with now have mastered, but it's a common confession about how we hope to grow in Christ, living at a speed of being known, both by God and by those close to us. And by our neighbors, who we need to know better.

[00:03:15] **Eva Bleeker:** If I could just jump in here and say, I join you in that confession, Matt. And when I review the film on a regular basis, I find often that I have conflated some kind of secular definition of self-care with the opportunity to really be known by the Lord in the process of moving at a counter cultural pace, whatever that may be. And that is really the heart of my attraction to the film. So, I want to just implicate my own weakness in this conversation and thank you for beginning us there.

[00:03:49] **Don Payne:** Yeah, well, Matt, maybe give listeners a little snippet of the background of the film. They'll certainly learn more if they watch it, which I hope they will. But what was the impetus for that as you began your journey in pastoral ministry and then had to go through some of these shifts in your own thinking?

[00:04:07] **Matt Canlis:** When I was training at seminary, there were several professors who were doing a great job of screening us to make sure that none of us were pursuing ministry for the sake of our own ambitions. Even though we were pretty good at dressing those ambitions up with Christian talk about what God wanted or how we were called. And I think partly because Eugene saw through me and others, he gave us counsel to go to places that were not in the spotlight. And in my case, he said, Matt, you should go try a parish in Europe and learn the old way of being a pastor in a parish. So. That's what happened when my wife won a scholarship to study at St. Andrews, we both showed up to do PhDs, but I got a job part time with the Church of Scotland, which began to teach me a whole different way of pastoring than I had known previously, which emphasized preaching, which is very important, but didn't require the pastor to visit homes. So, when my first job began to be not going into the office to prepare a sermon or make phone calls, but to knock on doors, it was culture shock.

[00:05:27] **Don Payne:** You referred to Eugene, and I think you're talking about Eugene Peterson. Is that correct?

[00:05:32] **Matt Canlis:** That's right.

[00:05:33] **Don Payne:** He talks in the film, I believe, in a conversation between the two of you, about busyness as a way of hiding from being known. Is this really all about that fear of being known? Or is that a large part of what we need to be getting at here, that fear of being known?

[00:05:51] **Matt Canlis:** I think so. And I don't want the film to give the impression that when I stand up two thirds the way through it and look out on the congregation and they switch from being the congregation to being people I can name, that my congregants are the ones who know me best. That would be inappropriate. I was moving from thinking of them as an audience that I needed to, not entertain, that's unkind, but win over or influence, to being persons who I actually knew and who knew me. But the fear of being known actually goes more to the heart of what Eva was saying about being known by God. And being known by those close to us. So, when Jesus says, love your neighbor as yourself, he's not just talking about the neighbor across the street. He's talking about if you're married, your spouse. If you have children, your kids. If you live with grandma. The ones closest to you are sometimes the most complicated relationships. And so in Scotland, because we lived in one home, in one neighborhood, and there were no accoutrements or things to distract us with busyness, it wasn't life in a fishbowl just in the neighborhood, but in our own house, and church on Sunday wasn't what do I say to influence, but who am I all week long as I've been living with these people who see my life as though I'm a fish in a fishbowl? So, on all these different levels appropriate to the relationship, we do need to, I don't like the word vulnerable because it's overused and it can almost imply that people need to be vulnerable at every level. And then you have a vulnerability hangover afterwards, but at each level of friendship or congregant or spouse, I do hope I can encourage people to risk being known.

[00:08:04] **Eva Bleeker:** I want to give you an invitation, Matt, since we are joining you from the context of theological education and what you're saying is so close to my heart for my students, as well as for alumni of seminaries. And I wonder what you would say is at risk if we move into

vocational ministry without that orientation to authenticity or openness to being known by God and other?

[00:08:39] **Matt Canlis:** Well, sadly, I don't have to answer the question on one level because there are so many examples in the church today of churches that have not lasted long and fallen apart because our leadership wasn't prepared in the ways that I was graciously prepared for over years by a great seminary team. So, name your church split, name your crisis in America, and that's the fruit of what we're discussing. As it relates personally, there's a Puritan writer named Perkins who talked about first and second vocation. And when Jim Houston first asked, Matt, what is your vocation? And I thought, to be a pastor? And then I thought no, to be a husband and a father. And then I thought no, it must be to be a Christian. And Jim just kept smiling. And said, no, it's to be a child. Your first calling is to be a child of God, secure in Christ, in your baptism by faith. And from that place of living and moving and having your being in Christ, not proving yourself, in all the ways the devil tempted Jesus to prove himself right after his baptism, which you'll notice were all actually good temptations. It wasn't wine, women, and song. It was to ministry. It was to miracles. It was to showing who Jesus was to the world, all of which are things he would later do. But never with the lead in, if you are God's Son, then do something to prove it. And though none of us in ministry would say that's why we're in it, there are so many subtleties and unnamed motivations that bring us, I think, into the desert of ministry to fall prey to the devil. Because unlike Jesus, who was living by the baptismal words of the Father, you are my beloved Son, whom I love and in whom I delight. And he heard that at age 30, when he'd done nothing to show anybody anything about who he was. Then Jesus goes into three years of ministry. For us, it's the opposite. We get three years of seminary and are released into 30 years of ministry, and I marvel that Jesus was slower to step into that role, had better baptismal training, and was able to resist temptation before he started his. We need schools and spiritual directors and pastoral mentors who take our students through the same training Jesus received before we go anywhere near the church in a leadership position.

[00:11:40] **Don Payne:** Matt, I think somewhere in the film, you use the words radical and power I think in reference to some contemporary obsessions with those in church life or in Christian faith, wanting to have a radical faith, or being obsessed with power. And I used that in the intro to our conversation, but I would love to hear you, in light of what you just said, redefine radical and power in the ways we ought to be experiencing them.

[00:12:13] **Matt Canlis:** Sure. Well, and I can't remember if those words are in the film or not. I know they're in my wife's opening pages of her book, *Theology of the Ordinary*, which talks about radical and impact and power. And so, whether it's from her book or my film, I can't remember. But any word that we use has to have Biblical and theological roots. And radical is not a word I see appearing in the Gospels. Power is sometimes used throughout the New Testament. But I'm more comfortable with words like faithfulness, prayer, dipping my hand in the font to remember my baptism, loving God, loving my neighbor with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. I'm always a little reluctant to give words that don't appear often in the Bible a more Christian take because it often doesn't take. So, I know *Godspeed* was a word that's not in the Bible, but we picked that one because it was fun to kind of work with.

[00:13:29] **Don Payne:** It's still a good word. It's still fine word. Speaking of words, talk to us about names. I know that in the film you and Eugene Peterson talk a good bit about names, people's names, the significance, even the theology of names. What do we miss when we miss that?

[00:13:51] **Matt Canlis:** Well, Eugene writes a lot about this, but basically the name is the beginning of the person. It's not just letters, and this goes back to the origins of God's own name, but it's

almost the embodiment of the person in this way of expressing who they are. And I think of C. S. Lewis in *Perelandra* and how the unmanned, when he was tempting Ransom, nearly drove Ransom mad by simply calling out the name Ransom, but never facing him, never following through, and to be named and called but not engaged is a torture. It's a way of being named and summoned and then ignored. And so to reverse that image, Christians should be the ones who don't just know people's names, but when we summon, let me put it provocatively, when we summon the gods, that is to say, when we summon someone made in the image of God by name, we are then meant to be attentive to them and give our presence in a way that welcomes their presence. Jim Houston used to say to me, before you meet with someone, Matt, you should always pray this prayer, Lord, put me in awe of the person before me. And I don't always pray that prayer, but I should. And when I do, there's an awareness of the person and not just their name, but how the name is an invitation to know and be known by them.

[00:15:37] **Don Payne:** I love that. I remember some years ago, reading in the late theologian, Stanley Grand's, one of his weighty theological tomes on God's name, and he made the point that throughout scripture, whenever God gave his name to someone, he gave himself. Names were never abstract or detachable descriptors, but they were the giving of person, the giving of self to give one's name. That impacted me deeply.

[00:16:08] **Eva Bleeker:** That's beautifully said.

[00:16:10] **Matt Canlis:** And it's rather taking of the Lord's name in vain isn't that you're just saying a curse word. It's that you are using a person's identity in a way that isn't giving dignity to their person. That's why the name isn't just words. It's the beginning of the person's embodiment.

[00:16:30] **Don Payne:** I love that.

[00:16:32] **Eva Bleeker:** It says something to me too, pastorally, that using the name is a signal of belovedness and of the unique story behind that individual instead of just moving past a generic member of your parish. It is this unique call between self and other when we use the name.

[00:16:51] **Matt Canlis:** Yes. And that's why in baptism, the person is named along with the persons of God who are named. So, yeah, Elizabeth Emily Smith, in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit. You have this encounter of names and persons forever united in this sacrament of naming and entering into communion with each other.

[00:17:20] **Don Payne:** Matt, your entire journey as you've spoken about it now, and you chronicle this in the film, *Godspeed*, it evokes in me a sense of freedom, for lack of a better word, freedom that you have found and I think have grown into increasingly through the years, and I'm curious what that freedom, if that's a good descriptor, what that freedom looks like for you now, and what new challenges or iterations of that freedom have you experienced over the years that you've been on this journey?

[00:17:55] **Matt Canlis:** Well, when Paul writes about the glorious freedom of the children of God, he's referencing the wide-open country that is ours in Christ as the beloved children of God in Christ, as we follow Jesus and are filled by the spirit and learn to love God and our neighbors and ourselves. I would say that freedom for me is happening a few places. Of late, I'm feeling it in the church. There's a beautiful thing happening in our congregation as each of us are learning. There's a long story here, but we are ourselves a church that split apart and is now trying to come together again

around Jesus Christ and orthodox Christianity, and we've just placed a font in the middle of our path that we used to have to run down to get to church, but now we're stopped by the font and whether people have some Catholic roots or not, they're all beginning to just dip a finger in the font and maybe two or three and then maybe a hand to begin to remember their baptism and sometimes make the sign of the cross. But always see ourselves as the children of God who, in this place, as with Jesus, with his disciples, ask him questions, be direct, sometimes cry out, sometimes laugh. And so, I'm watching the regeneration of a church of people who are together entering this freedom. And we need each other to do this. It's not something you can do on your own. That's why when I wrote *Backyard Pilgrim*, it was partly because when people watch *Godspeed*, they made two mistakes. They thought, I just got to slow down, or I just got to move to Scotland, neither of which are true. *Backyard Pilgrim* is all about letting God find you in your backyard, in the place you live, in your local church. And the whole pilgrimage ends by going back into a local church, and rediscovering your baptism and the freedom that Christ knew both in the desert of temptation and in the three years of ministry afterward, where instead of trying to prove himself by what he did, he was the first child completely set free into the kingdom about which he's preached. And Paul wrote. So, I don't know if you guys are watching *The Chosen*, which I have one or two difficulties with, but in general, the freedom you see in Jesus himself and his playfulness and directness and power in the disciples themselves is modeling this freedom that the New Testament captures brilliantly, and I think the *Chosen* is beginning to reveal in film.

[00:21:05] **Eva Bleeker:** You're talking about your experience with your congregation there in Wenatchee, Matt, and I feel like it is the right time for me to bring into our dialogue a question that comes from my students. You mentioned the mistakes that we make when we watch the *Godspeed* film, and I am guilty of both, every time. I see this pastoral landscape, I see kilts and tea being poured, and I think the way to live in the spirit of Jesus clearly is in Scotland. So, my students ask this question every time we view the film in the educational setting, which is after viewing the epilogue, when you knock on a door there in the state of Washington, they say, what happened? Was Pastor Matt able to implement the learning he received from the Lord in that season where he was pastoring in Scotland after returning to the States? And if not, why not? What challenges surprised him? And I hear you saying these beautiful things about the font slowing the progression to worship. But I wonder if you would answer just on a, maybe a practical level straight to my students. What happened when you came back to the U. S. having had this rich experience and then finding yourself back here?

[00:22:36] **Matt Canlis:** It's a great question. And like the font is a speed bump to slow down, remember your baptism, there's speed bumps everywhere. You just have to learn to let them wake you up. And here's some examples. Every time I see a yellow light, I try to slow down instead of speed through. So, every yellow light in Wenatchee. Is a gift to me. When I'm tempted to shop at Costco, but I have to pass Plaza Superjet, our local small store, I think to myself, I actually want Plaza Superjet. A little more expensive, but I know the clerks there, it's going to take less time. I'm going to buy less stuff and focus on what I need. When I chose a haircutter, I wanted it to be within walking distance of the church so that I could maintain that relationship. When I picked a place to play ball, I picked the YMCA, which was just down the street from the church, so I could walk to there from work. Eugene always used to say the antidote is near the poison. In nature where there's poison ivy, there's a fern nearby. You're not supposed to move. You're supposed to notice the antidotes or the speed bumps that are in every parish if you will respect them. When Psalm 16: 6 says, the boundaries have fallen for me in pleasant places. That's saying there's speed bumps and boundaries that are good if we will respect them or notice them. So, I've got good news. I'm still confessing not yet living all the ways I want to in Christ, but there has been growth in America with what I learned in Scotland in this congregation as we together notice the gifts in our parish that help us pay attention. Now, I'm not knocking on doors anymore. That doesn't work. There are dogs and guns in

America, and it's not the same situation. So, there's definitely been some retranslating, but I've been pleasantly surprised by how the epilogue of the film was at the end. It was the beginning of learning what to do here in Christ in this backyard.

[00:25:09] **Don Payne:** I recall that in that epilogue, one of your parishioners at the church in Wenatchee made a comment about this and said, I have no idea how to do this.

[00:25:20] **Matt Canlis:** Yeah. There's a few lines like epilogue. And you know, we deliberately edited the film to get the ones that were most, this is never going to work. And that's why this is a continuing confession. Yeah, don't hear me say, we have figured this out. But we have figured what we hunger and thirst for. And, to quote Jesus, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled. And as we hunger and thirst for this righteousness, which Bruce Waltke taught us, is being rightly related. Don't think self-righteousness, think righteousness that's related to God, to myself in Christ, to my neighbors, and to creation. As we hunger and thirst for this connectedness or right living, we are learning how to be satisfied in healthy ways in Christ. So, there's still a hunger and a thirst, and there's the beginning of a new diet. And whether you're just beginning to notice that there is a new diet, or you've been healthy, learning how to live and eat this way, we are discovering what the Bible promises. And Jesus brings home into our ordinary lives.

[00:26:43] **Don Payne:** Matt you talk in the film about the significance of others giving us grace when we can't give grace to ourselves. And I hear quite frequently, Christians refer to the importance of giving grace to themselves. And I'd love to have you comment on that, the difference or the relationship between others giving us grace when we can't give grace to ourselves.

[00:27:11] **Matt Canlis:** That's a good question. Yeah, there's two problems in giving grace to myself. Number one, I am not very good at it. Number two, the grace I give myself is often licensed to do what I want. So again, it's Christianese for giving grace, which is actually not grace.

[00:27:30] **Don Payne:** Just let myself off the hook, right?

[00:27:32] **Matt Canlis:** Correct. An example of the grace I need from others is just the other day in this office, being stuck in my mind trying to figure out what to do next, I noticed Mike outside the window working on the sprinklers and I thought, I need to go pray with Mike. And so, I went outside, helped him with the sprinkler, not really, I can't fix anything. But then said, Mike, you got to pray. And here's what I'm wrestling with. Here's what I'm stuck in my brain cell trying to figure out. Can you help me? And Mike said, sure. And Mike's simple, short, attentive prayer was the grace I needed to get unstuck, to get outside, to be with a brother in Christ, to receive a restart that I can't do on my own. So, there's many examples of that. That's one. But I like that you're calling out that just giving grace to myself has two problems that I articulated and back to the self-help thing that Eva mentioned, and self-care is so important, but there's a logical fallacy in the problem of self-care in that I'm the self that got myself into the mess. I need outside help and accountability from God and from others and my spiritual director so that I can receive the grace they are trying to teach me how to receive and the grace not just to be forgiven, but to be strengthened to go into a life-giving obedience that is the freedom we talked about earlier.

[00:29:22] **Don Payne:** Matt, because we're in a seminary context, if you were training people for ministry, pastoral or otherwise, how would you go about that? How would you approach the classical disciplines of biblical and theological and practical studies that make up a curriculum?

Reflecting back, I'm sure, on your own seminary education and what you've learned in the years since.

[00:29:46] **Matt Canlis:** Well, I was very fortunate to be at Regent College at a time when they were doing a great job of mixing lectures, prayer, spiritual direction into just a potent mix. What would I do now? I would take the best pastors actively involved in churches and have them become the teacher mentors of people considering ministry. And I'd walk them through some of the things that we just talked about. And I would match their classroom education with the practicums they're doing live in the church. I would outsource some of the classes to some of the best online things possible. And I didn't used to think that. But now I do for accessibility and for people who can't always afford seminary. And I would make the relational emphasis upon mentoring the key to everything. And not just trying to get a three-year degree, but having like six stages, like the critical journey book of discovering who you are in Christ, what you need to go through to become mature. And then maybe we think about ministry because I'm very motivated to have people in leadership who are trustworthy and are in ministry, not for their own sake, but because they first entered into the glorious freedom of being the children of God. And as Eugene put it, his job was to be the healthiest person in the congregation, helping other people in Christ be healthy. And so. I don't know what the structure is. I just know that Jesus did a better job than most of us at being trained for ministry. And that he lived a healthier life than many Christian leaders I see. And that to be in him is to live as he lived. And we've got to practice that in a live setting. That's going to be like the one we enter into, the other side of seminary.

[00:32:01] **Don Payne:** Well, I really appreciate that. That resonates very deeply with many of the values we have here at Denver and have tried to pursue for a few decades now. So, I'm glad to hear the way you articulated that.

[00:32:14] **Eva Bleeker:** I don't have a closing question, Matt, but it does feel important in our conversation to give gratitude to you. The way that you have used your own story as a vision of what can be true for people in training and hoping for a pastoral vocation is continually refreshing to me and sets a really powerful example for my students. So, I just want to end by saying thank you for being willing to put your own story out in the world for other people.

[00:32:48] **Matt Canlis:** Oh, you're welcome, Eva. I like storytelling and I'm now 51 years old and I have lots of stories to tell. So thank you for the chance to make it personal on this podcast and I hope that you and your students keep discovering the story that the author and perfecter of our faith is making and that you learn to give grace to one another, and that there's, a relational reformation that is beginning, that it's across denominations, that is bringing some of the integrity and freedom we're talking about. From what I hear about Denver Seminary, and I've never been there, I think good things are happening.

[00:33:36] **Don Payne:** We hope and pray so. That's such a delight. My thanks to you as well, Matt. While we're kind of landing the plane here, I do want to refer listeners to your website, which is livegodspeed.org. And information about the Godspeed film and other resources you and Julie have are there on that website livegodspeed.org. And then you mentioned your wife Julie's book, *A Theology of the Ordinary*, and now that I look at my own notes it was from her that I got those words, passionate and radical, from the first pages of her book, *A Theology of the Ordinary*, which I would highly commend. Your wife Julie is a very capable theologian and want to give her a plug while we're at that. We've been interacting with Reverend Matt Canlis from Trinity Church in Wenatchee, Washington, and the producer of Godspeed. And Matt, you've just been a real gift to us. Thanks for your time and for this conversation and for the water you've poured into our own souls.

And I think we'll pour by God's grace into many of our listeners. So, it's been a delight to interact with you.

[00:34:47] **Matt Canlis:** Yeah, thank you both. And if people read Backyard Pilgrim, it's fun to start on the first Sunday in Lent, which this year is earlier than usual and then it walks you on a Bible path from Genesis to Jesus and from your backyard to your local church across the journey of Lent. So, it's a timely read in the next month.

[00:35:11] **Don Payne:** Excellent. Excellent. I'm glad for that plug.