



## Jesus Hacked: Storytelling Faith

a weekly podcast from the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri  
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### Episode 105: Baptism is not a one-time event

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**Dan Handschy:** Hello, welcome to JesusHacked, a podcast of the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri. My name is Dan Handschy. I am the rector of Church of the Advent in the Diocese of Missouri in Crestwood. Our guest today is Willow Morris, also a member of the Church of the Advent. Welcome, Willow. Welcome.

**Willow Morris:** It's good to be here.

**Dan Handschy:** Let's get straight to the meat of this interview. When we at Church of the Advent first met Willow, her name was Justin and we have walked through that transition a little bit with her and so as we're talking this season about the theme of baptism and baptismal identity, speaking to Willow just seemed like a good way to start. So Willow, I want to ask you, when were you baptized?

**Willow Morris:** So I was originally baptized as an infant to the Methodist Church. I spent the first, I believe it was five years in a Methodist Church in a small town of Carrollton, Missouri. My mom remarried into the Catholic Church and I was confirmed into the Catholic Church and I actually spent many years bouncing around between different denominations, from Methodist to Catholic, to Southern Baptist and then back to the Methodist Church.

Dan Handschy: So this was with your family, moving from denomination to denomination?

Willow Morris: Yes.

Dan Handschy: When did you begin to discover that your identity wasn't what you thought it was?

Willow Morris: So as long as I can remember, I, even as a little kid, I knew my experience was just different than everyone else's. That growing up in a very small town, masculinity was favored and that many of my siblings who were my brothers, as well as my father and my friends, were very proud of their masculinity and their male identity. Not only did I not feel that, but it felt so foreign to me. I recognized in myself that instead of it just being a natural thing, a natural part of who I was, it instead was just something I was just constantly trying to pretend--to fit in.

Dan Handschy: Trying to manufacture that sense of maleness.

Willow Morris: Yes, absolutely.

Dan Handschy: Okay. How did that fit with your sort of religious experience? I mean, Catholic, Southern Baptist. What messages were you getting from the Church?

Willow Morris: The overwhelming theme of my childhood was this sense of not being good enough, that I did not have the experience that as a male member of a small town and of the various Christian Churches that belong to, I just constantly felt that I was not living up to what God had created me, supposedly had created me to be and who I was supposed to be. So it left me this sense of that I was not worthy of God, I was not worthy of my community and my life, my very life itself didn't have much meaning.

Dan Handschy: At what age were you confirmed?

Willow Morris: So in the Catholic Church or-

Dan Handschy: Yeah.

Willow Morris: I was eight years old.

Dan Handschy: Okay. Were you confirmed again then in a different tradition?

Willow Morris: Yes, then I was confirmed when I was 13 years old into the Methodist Church.

Dan Handschy: Okay. How did you experience that sort of reaffirmation of your baptismal vows?

Willow Morris: It was, in a sense, it was a fleeting hope. It was this idea that this time maybe I could really give myself fully to Christ and that God would take away what I saw as sinful desires and make me good enough to be the person that was supposed to be.

Dan Handschy: So there was, throughout this sense of inadequacy, a sense of salvation hasn't taken-

Willow Morris: Right.

Dan Handschy: so what was salvation like for you? What did you imagine salvation would be?

Willow Morris: So to me, salvation in childhood and into my teenage years had always been this hope that I would die to that of this world, which to me included the aspects of myself that I was deeply uncomfortable with and that the Church did not look favorably upon, that I would die to that and would be risen as being a straight male individual that was acceptable both in the eyes of God and the eyes of the Church.

Dan Handschy: So you and Melissa got married. When did you get married? How old were you?

Willow Morris: I was 23 years old at the time.

Dan Handschy: Okay. What's your educational background? Were you in college?

Willow Morris: Yeah. So, and I ended up meeting my wife in Truman State University, studying there, remarkably, through a Bible study. But, yeah, I was studying there, studying psychology with a minor in philosophy, religion, and would end up going on to get a masters in professional counseling.

Dan Handschy: Okay. How did the two of you discover the Episcopal Church?

Willow Morris: So, and this was many years later when I was 27. I came out to Melissa as a woman, as trans and at that point it shook us and we did not know that there would be any Churches that we could go to. Because from my background, and from her background too, the Church was so opposed to the LGBTQ community that we didn't know if anything like that existed until we happened to find one of your essays that you've written about LGBTQ acceptance.

Dan Handschy: Oh, interesting. Where did you find that?

Willow Morris: So it was on with the Oasis page.

Dan Handschy: Oh, okay.

Willow Morris: Which it was really healing and remarkable to me that the idea that there would be a Church that would allow someone like me to come into their doorsteps.

Dan Handschy: So you were already out to Melissa when you guys showed up at Advent.

Willow Morris: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dan Handschy: Okay. So we were kind of catching up with you.

Willow Morris: Yeah, at the time, I was not comfortable being out.

Dan Handschy: Right.

Willow Morris: But I wanted it to be somewhere where I had more high hopes that I could actually come out and become part of the community.

Dan Handschy: So what made you then finally feel comfortable enough? Because I remember you, the two of you came to me and said, "We're ready to take this step." What led to that?

Willow Morris: There are many factors. Part of it was on an individual basis, when you first come out as trans, and for me especially, it was absolutely terrifying. I did not know if I'd be able to function in society at large, more or less inside the Church and getting to learn and to adapt to that new way of life was extremely important. Then also on the flip side, as far as the Church community itself, I wanted to get to know people.

Dan Handschy: Right.

Willow Morris: I wanted to get to know you and make sure that I felt comfortable and safe with you before I was willing to make myself vulnerable like that.

Dan Handschy: I remember and so I'm going to tell a little piece of my side of the story. I remember when you and Melissa came. I was uncomfortable. We had certainly had gay people at Church of the Advent before. Never been through someone coming out as trans. I wasn't quite sure how we were going to respond. What was your experience? Did you experience my discomfort?

Willow Morris: You know what, I actually remember it very vividly, you crossing your legs, which the counselor in me knows that ... How to read body

language and that was very obvious. But it was also to be expected. This is something that many people have never experienced before. They have no idea what to imagine. What I gathered from you later on was, part of the discomfort was that not knowing how is the community going to respond.

Dan Handschy: Right, right. I mean, I knew of my own discomfort and I own that, but I was also worried how would Advent respond. So how did we do that? Do you remember how we handled that with the congregation?

Willow Morris: So what we had decided is that me and Melissa would both write a letter to the congregation and post it in the monthly bulletin. For me, that was this really terrifying but liberating experience and put it out there and then I was half expecting there to be a huge response or a huge backlash or something and being utterly shocked at the lack of response. It was wonderful. But there-

Dan Handschy: As I recall, you guys were away for like three weeks with the newsletter went out and you were traveling somewhere. So there was three weeks and during that three weeks there were people who came and said [sound]. What was it like when you came back the first Sunday after the letter had gone out?

Willow Morris: So I was actually quite taken aback about how normal it felt, that I came in just like most other weeks and some people had come up to me and giving me hugs and had showed their love, but it was nothing extravagant and most people just went on with their business.

Dan Handschy: Okay, so going back to your experience in the earlier traditions, where you had this sense of the necessity of dying to this piece of identity and being raised and clearly that's language that we use about baptism. I want to read this prayer that we say after we've baptized someone and then ask you to reflect on how that might be, how you might understand that differently now. So at the end of a baptism, we say this prayer,

*Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon this your servant the forgiveness of sin, and have raised her to the new life of grace. Sustain her, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give her an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works.*

Is there something in that prayer that sort of stands out for you now where you are in your journey?

Willow Morris: So the biggest one is the new life. What does life look like? For me growing up, new life looked like being a straight man that I had

constantly hoped for and having that expectation that if I just did it right, I gave myself to God enough, where I have confessed enough on my sins to God, that that's what salvation would look like for me and that's what new life would look like for me and it never came because God had different ideas of what new life, and instead now what it means to me is taking away that expectation of, "Okay, what's my life supposed to look like? And let's let God show me what's new life supposed to look like."

Dan Handschy: Cool. Good. Yeah. I remember one of my anxieties was the question with the new identity, would we need to baptize you again, right? I went to a colleague and I said, "So what do I do about this?" and my colleague just laughed and said, "Oh, God knew who she was." On baptism. I was like, "Oh, okay, right," because we can't repeat baptism but here's this new identity. So it's interesting that you see this as a dying and rising, as a coming to a new place.

Willow Morris: Yeah.

Dan Handschy: So you and Melissa have had a child, Elijah, and brought him to Advent to be baptized. What is your hope for Elijah? He's what, a year old now?

Willow Morris: Yeah. He just turned a year old.

Dan Handschy: I was thinking as I was driving down here, September, yeah, he's a year. What's your hope for him?

Willow Morris: So my hope is that he can discover new life in who God created him to be and not his or anyone else's expectations on what his life is supposed to be. And that he would be given the space to just explore life and to be who he is because God creates people beautiful and there's something so magnificent, amazing when you see the authenticity and people being able to live their lives and that's what I would love for Elijah to do.

Dan Handschy: So how have you and Melissa kind of reached, I mean, you said that when you came out to her, it rocked both of you, what has happened since? How have you come to terms with that?

Willow Morris: So, and yes, in the beginning it was very jarring, especially for Melissa, she had a vision of what her life was to be like. And that was all a sudden turn, completely on its head. And since then, as she has told me, this is better than any dream I've had before.

DH: Really!

WM: Yeah!

DH: I remember her saying when you were in my office, I asked her, so, are you going to stay married? And she said, 'She's still the person I married' and I thought that was really touching.

WH: Absolutely!

DH: But what a big adjustment.

WH: Yeah, and I commend her for just being there for me. She has become my biggest supporter in all of this now. It is this sense of, for her, I am hers and she is mine. That doesn't change no matter what.

DH: So one of the themes that I've heard you talk about through this interview is that sense of almost terror, that you would be able to live your life in the world. How has God, How has Church, How has your understanding of your baptism helped you navigate that?

WH: It's the idea of the sense of worth. When I was a child, the inability to be who I thought I was supposed to be reflected my worth as a human individual. I spent a lot of times in a very dark place because I didn't think it was worth living. And, that's where the terror sets in, because if you're not worth it on your own, then your worth is dependent on your works or on your actions or anything else like that—everything that's external.

And what this has done, my worth has been declared by God and through his sacrifice, just because of his love. The fear is taken away in the sense that it no longer depends upon anything that I do. I don't have to risk failure or risk the condemnation from other people for how I'm viewed.

DH: Cool. Have you come out to your family?

WM: I have come out to my family.

DH: And how have they responded?

WH: I come from a divorced family, and I've had two very different reactions. My father and step-mother have been rocked by this, but they have been loving and gracious to me as they've tried to learn to adjust. This is very jarring for them. Especially for my father who was there the day I was born and has seen me as a man for years and years.

It's a lot like Melissa's response, I'm his child and that is never going to change.

For my mom's side of the family, unfortunately my worth to them was as being the son that she saw me as, and without that, she doesn't want to be a part of my life anymore.

DH: That's hard.

WM: Yeah.

DH: So how about your siblings?

WM: I have mixed responses from my siblings. Some of them do not talk to me. A couple of them are unbelievably loving and supportive, and who were there for me, and are keeping me in their lives.

DH: So, your Master's Degree is in Counseling

WH: Yeah.

DH: And you counsel people who are also going through transition, and family issues?

WH: I've had a couple of opportunities to see individuals that are trans as well, yes.

DH: And so your experience then is very fruitful, in your counseling sort of knowing that people can get through this...

WH: Yes. Everyone going through the transition process is very different, but I think there is a sense of comfort from people that I can actually relate this experience into the terror and the struggle that comes with, 'Am I going to be accepted by my family?' 'Am I going to be accepted by my significant other?'

DH: Yeah.

WM: 'Am I going to be accepted by my community?'

DH: So one last word, that sense of inadequacy, that sense of fear, of not living up to who God wants you to be, has that abated? Are you feeling more comfortable? Is there a sense of relief going forward? Have you been able to claim that baptismal identity and..... I know Dale [Advent parishioner] said the day you came back to church, "I was really not sure about this but when I see how happy she is, I think it's right." Does he read that right?

WM: It's always a process. There are some days that I have that are better than others. But overall is this trajectory of constantly being affirmed in my identity and my belonging to Christ. And it continues to be more and more fulfilling to me.

DH: Good. We sort of live into our baptism, it's not a one-off ...

WH: No... If there's anything I've learned it's that baptism is a process, it is not a one-time event.

DH: Cool. Well we look forward to shepherding Elijah through that as well, so...

WH: Absolutely.

DH: Thank you for being with us today.

WH: Thank you so much for having me.

DH: Thank you.