**Steve Spilde:** Welcome. Today it is my great privilege to welcome Diana Butler Bass to the podcast. Diana is an award-winning writer of 11 books, including “Grounded,” “Grateful,” and her newest book, “Freeing Jesus.” Diana will be presenting a daylong retreat at the Franciscan Spirituality Center on Saturday, June 19th [rescheduled to April 9]. I will provide more details later. Meanwhile, I’m excited to begin this conversation with our special guest. Diana, if I described your work to a friend, I would use words like “author,” “teacher,” “preacher,” “theologian,” “journalist,” or “historian.” How would describe your work?

**Diana Butler Bass:** Oh, my gosh, that’s a great question to begin. While I love all those words – and they do describe who I am, especially the word “teacher” – I think that encapsulates something that’s about me and my heart and my calling in a very, very rich way. I tend to think of myself as a person who is in love with words and in love with the world and in love with thought, and is a journey of faith. My self-description always involves my passion, and it involves a sense of movement in and through life. That’s how I would describe myself.

**Steve:** Was there a point when you thought, “I want to be a writer when I grow up?” Or did that evolve over time?

**Diana:** That evolved over time. I was born in 1959, so I was growing up in the 1960s. I was the eldest child in a family of three siblings. It was me and then my brother in the middle, and then my little sister. What was sort of fascinating about growing up in the 1960s [was] it was the very tail-end of some fairly traditional cultural patterns. My mother, while she was deeply committed to the idea that women should be highly educated – she insisted that I go to college when I was a really little kid – most of my extended family was this German background, very stern kind of family. Sometimes I tell people I grew up in 19th Century Germany; it was like that. That meant that there were very limited roles, and very few expectations for women giving their gifts to the world – except if you happen to have a radical mother who was always pushing at the system. All of that is to say my brother was a very gifted writer at a very young age. I can remember when he was 7 or 8 years old, he wrote an entire novel. By the time he was 12, he had like three collections of poetry. Everyone thought that he was going to become a writer. I think people got used to the idea I might go to college, and so the expectation, of course, was that I would be a teacher or a nurse or one of the helping professions. Of that, of course, teaching was the thing that always drew me, which it wasn’t just for me an acceptance of a kind of conservative female role.

I really think there was a deep vocation of teaching in my family for several generations, and that because they were poor, they were mostly working-class people living in East Coast urban environments. My mother only went to 12th grade. Her parents only went to 8th grade. Their parents before them only went to 6th grade. No one really ever had the chance to become a teacher even though I do know three generations of my family had the desire to want to teach. So for me, that was a natural; it was sort of in my DNA as a vocation. I wanted to go there. It took me a long time to understand my calling towards writing was another way of teaching.

**Steve:** The first calling was to be a teacher, then you could best do that by writing.

**Diana:** I teach all the time in retreats and workshops – things like that. For 14 years, I was a college professor, and I still occasionally – very occasionally – have taught classes at the seminary level or when someone has asked me to do some sort of adjuncting work. I’ve always found joy in that, and I loved the years I worked with undergraduate students in a more traditional teaching setting. Those 14 years really came to an end when my husband was offered a job in [Washington], D.C. We struggled with it mightily. We figured it would mean that I wouldn’t be teaching. You have to move to a teaching position rather than just like presenting yourself at Georgetown University and saying, “Here I am.” That’s when my husband and I just sort of said, “You always wanted to write. You always wanted to try that as a vocation.” That was around the year 2000, and that’s when I really gave my heart and soul to this alternative track of teaching through the pages of books and articles.

**Steve:** Reflect on this for me: It seems like a pleasant surprise if you have the calling to be a teacher, and you’re in a classroom and maybe speaking to 30 students at a time. And now you’re writing books that reach tens, hundreds of thousands, millions of people at a time teaching on so much of a larger scale. Does that kind of blow your mind at times?

**Diana:** I guess it does. I always think of my books as landing in the laps of a single reader. I know there are writers who think of themselves as being like New York Times bestselling writers where tens of thousands of people are going to buy their book in a single week or what have you. That’s never happened to me; my books don’t really sell that way. They sell well, but not quite in those sorts of numbers that would make me imagine myself in any kind of more grandiose sort of environment. But I do think about the individual person who finds their way to my words. I try to create that intimacy with the one reader, so that’s how I imagine it, although I do know that a lot of people who have been influenced by my books now. And that seems to me to be quite a gift, and the fact that my classroom, as it were, is public is a blessing. I don’t stop and take that for granted. I always trust that as a treasure, and it’s a privilege that not everyone has, so I try to hold it with as much grace and humility as I can.

**Steve:** At the Franciscan Spirituality Center, we do a lot of Spiritual Direction. It’s an opportunity for people to come and share their journey and process how they’ve moved along the journey. I hear a similar story with you. It’s not that you set out to be this person; you’ve just taken the journey one step at a time, and this is where you’re at. It sounds like there’s been some surprises along the way.

**Diana:** I think that in terms of vocation, there was this moment I remember very distinctly when I was in graduate school. I think this is true for anyone who is working with their spiritual journey, [and that is] to try to think about where God showed up or where you heard a calling on your life in a new way. One of those moments was, here I am training to become a college professor, working on a PhD, and I was friends with a really wonderful couple. The husband was an Episcopal priest, and his wife was an incredibly skilled Bible teacher who was not ordained. One dinner at their house – I can actually remember exactly the look of the living room – when Carol said this to me: “You know, Diana, I think you think of your own live too narrowly.” She went on, and she said, “I think you should consider your classroom something broader, and I think you should write books.” Then she went on to say that she’d read papers of mine that I’d written for grad school, and she said, “You know, you really are a gifted writer.” I had heard that from professors through college and through seminary, and then in my PhD work, but I never really thought about it. It was just like, “Oh, I just thought everyone wrote this way.” Clearly, there was some level of my own calling, my own gifts, that I didn’t see until people started pointing them out. And then, for some reason, when Carol said it, I really heard it.

Later on, I was sort of struggling with a particular job in a college that didn’t end particularly well. I remembered Carol’s words, and I thought, “Well, just because you have to leave one classroom doesn’t mean you’re leaving teaching. It doesn’t mean you’re leaving every classroom. Words have a way of traveling in the world, and maybe I really need to emphasize writing. That was kind of a trajectory for me. It happened mostly when I was in my mid- to late-20s to really sort of hear all of that for the first time. My brother, he heard it when he was 7. Me, it took 20 years to catch up to that and really think, “Oh, I can write.”

**Steve:** Who were some of the mentors and models to you of what that writing could look like as far as writing about the spiritual journey, writing about different understandings of God? You do that really well. Who were some of the people who really modeled that for you?

**Diana:** I think that my first sort of professional writing models were people who were in academia who were actually really good writers. That includes my mentor professor, George Marsden, who, for several years, was at Duke – that’s where I studied with him. He was one of the leading scholars of American Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism. He wrote a book called, “Fundamentalism in American Culture,” which sounds like it might be the dullest book you could possibly imagine. But it was a huge best-selling book. It was published in 1980, and it was kind of the charm of landing right at the beginning of when the Moral Majority and the Religious Right was born, and he was explaining that. But it’s a beautiful history, and I heard someone later describe his writing style as “a great golf swing.” He knew exactly how to swing the clubs so that the ball just flew in the right arc through the air and landed exactly where he wanted it to land. I never forgot that as a description of a sentence, especially a sentence in the history, so I aspired to that beautiful kind of sentence that could create the perfect landing of a word.

He was a big influence in that way, but then more in terms of sort of the public writing about God, there is no way of underestimating the impact of Kathleen Norris on my work. In the ‘90s, when I was thinking so seriously about where I was going to go with my academic career, Kathleen’s books were so popular. I think “Amazing Grace” and “The Cloister Walk” were both on the New York Times Bestseller List, and I remember reading both of those eagerly, thinking, “This is what I want to do.” From there, I started reading a lot more female writers who were in the same kind of genre, which was so powerful in the ‘90s. I think we forget how influential this sort of group of writing women was in the ‘90s. It was Annie Dillard. It was Kathleen Norris. [It was] Anne Lamott. [There was] a somewhat lesser known but just a stunning writer by the name of Roberta Bondi at Emory University for years. All of these women – I think Anne Lamott is probably the youngest of them; she’s 66 now – most of them are in their 70s, and a couple of them are a little bit older. Barbara Brown Taylor was just really starting up at that point in time. I really saw myself as sort of the younger sister, in a sense, of this group of women. I literally read everything they wrote, and I was finally lucky enough to meet and become friends with a number of them. Their words, their preaching, their ability to teach, their poetry – it just continues to influence me today. I feel quite amazed that I’ve gotten to be friends with some of them, and I still feel like I learn from them all the time.

**Steve:** My wife and I both grew up in North Dakota. We just had a talk the other day about how powerful Kathleen Norris’ book “Dakota” was for us, because growing up on the prairie was like the absence of everything. But yet, she really helped me to see that in spiritual terms like, no, this is a rich, wilderness experience.

**Diana:** I actually have a signed, hardback copy of “Dakota.” The first time I ever met Kathleen was at a book signing in Memphis, Tennessee. I went, and I think I had gotten a hardback copy in a used bookstore or something. She literally stopped the signing line and she looked at me and she said, “Where did you get this? There are so few of these copies that were sold.” I said, “I think my sister-in-law gave it to me,” and she [said], “Wow.” That’s one of my favorite possessions. She’s a wonder; I mean, she only wrote probably five books.

**Steve:** “The Virgin of Bennington.”

**Diana: “**Acedia [& me],” “The Cloister Walk,” “Amazing Grace,” “Dakota,” and maybe a book of poetry. It just shows that you can have just an incredible, powerful writing influence. Her spiritual vision is wider and farther than most of us will ever go. I really think so highly of her.

**Steve:** Thank you, thank you. That’s a cool memory and reflection.

**Diana:** This is a great story, because I think that some people just enjoy it. You never really know where your life is going to take you. Years later … Our first encounter was at this bookstore – I’m sure she has no memory of this at all unless she remembers some blonde-haired woman who showed up with a hardback copy of “Dakota” – it was probably at least a decade later. I was invited to preach at a church in Hawaii – Saint Clement’s Episcopal Church in Honolulu, which is a charming and wonderful place. I showed up on Sunday morning for preaching at the 7:30 a.m. service – which, for some reason, I have no idea why they have church so early in Hawaii, but they do. I guess so it’s people can go and surf after church. I showed up, it was 7 a.m., and I was standing in the sacristy of the church. One of the women came in who was doing the alter guild, and she [asked], “Have you looked at the program yet?” I said, “No, I haven’t seen it yet.” I opened the bulletin that she handed me, I looked through, and I said, “Isn’t that funny? The person reading The Gospel for me is named Kathleen Norris, just like the writer.” And she sort of shook her head and she said, “Didn’t anybody tell you?” I said, “No. What are you talking about?” She said, “It **is** Kathleen Norris, the writer.” I just said, “Are you kidding me? Kathleen Norris is reading The Gospel for my sermon?” She said, “She asked to.” And I [said], “Can I faint now?” It was probably the time entering a pulpit when I was the most terrified of any time that I’ve ever stepped into a pulpit to preach.

The charm of the whole event was that afterwards, she took me out to lunch, and we just had a most remarkable time, and her sharing how much she had appreciated the things that she had seen and read that I had written. I was just getting started at that point, and she asked me how she could encourage me.

**Steve:** That is so cool. That is so cool.

**Diana:** Surprises like that kind of lay all around our lives. We never really know when we embark on a path what will open for us. I think one of the things I’ve learned is to be ready for the surprise, and open to whomever shows up.

**Steve:** That’s a good segue to a question I really want to ask you today. Kathleen does that really well. You do that really well, describing the interior journey as you go through life, and particularly go through a spiritual life. [There is a] different understanding of who you are, a different understanding of who God is, [and] a different understanding of religious language. You’ve done that really well, and I think you’re a guide for a lot of people in that. One of the questions I have based on my own experience and the people I know is as we go through these journeys of kind of moving from … You referenced your mentor, [who has] written a lot about fundamentalists. People who, say, come out of a fundamentalist understanding of God and get an invitation to a broader view, we can grow. But each of those stages is like leaving a home behind, and the emotional pain of that and the grief of that journey, can you talk about that a bit?

**Diana:** There are several books where I’ve written very directly about my own spiritual journey. Most of my books, even the ones that are more about trends in spirituality or more about church history, those books include vignettes of memoir. I think that memoir is an incredibly powerful thing because it connects us to each other. I assume that everyone has a story. I want people to share their stories, and I try to create these invitations to people seeing how their story connects with larger stories – the stories of The Bible, the stories of their culture, the stories of the history that we’re writing together now in our time. That to me is sort of fundamental to my calling as a writer.

And what I think is sort of interesting about that is we tend to, I think in the United States, privilege certain kinds of stories. We tend to privilege stories of success, wealth, and privilege stories of what I would call cheerfulness or prosperity. There are memoirs that are written, at least for a long time, that were all this sort of positive kind of upward curve memoirs. Then, there’s kind of a trend now of writing memoir of despair, or memoir of, “Boy, did I really mess everything up,” although people love to use all the swear words to describe that kind of memoir. There’s the prosperity/joy memoir, and then the reaction is the “I’m a screwup” memoir, but nevertheless there are good things along the way. I think that there is something that’s kind of less than completely in my experiential realm in either one of those two things. I think that most of us experience our lives as some levels of joy and surprise, success that we didn’t anticipate. And then other times, we experience our lives as failure. Sometimes it’s, we move up to something better. But oftentimes when we move on, that can be a struggle. We didn’t really want to move on, and there is grief involved.

I think that there is this space for storytelling that involves both of those things. I don’t know what you want to call that as memoir, but I certainly have written a lot about moments of surprise and success – and I just told one about meeting Kathleen Norris on a morning that I just showed up in a church in Hawaii to preach a sermon. That would be a great thing to have in a memoir: *“Kathleen Norris came and said that my work was fantastic.”* What got me to that moment was the fact that I got fired from a job when I was teaching at an Evangelical college and spent four years basically in absolute hell, struggling with what I thought about Evangelical doctrine and trying to come to terms with my own vocation and whether or not it could be alive without a job as a professor. Life is always a mix of both the moments of opportunity, surprise, and unanticipated joy, [and] sometimes the tremendous grief it took to get us there. To try to figure out how to tell both of those stories in tandem I think has always been one of the challenges I have laid before myself.

There’s a particular chapter in my new book, “Freeing Jesus,” in Chapter 5, it’s called “The Way.” It’s looking at how Jesus is the way; Jesus says that: *“I am The Way.”* But, how? How do we understand what it means that Jesus is The Way? In that chapter, I tell a story of how I imagined Jesus to be The Way at one point in my life when I was around 30 years old. But really, that way was the wrong way. And as I got down that particular road too far, I discovered that the way that I had thought was Jesus’ way was actually a way of self-harm, and a way of doing violence, actually, to myself and to the world. I wound up in the very conservative, very Calvinistic circle for a while. I said things and did things and believed things that I’m ashamed of now, and it was all in the name of Jesus. It was all in the name of doctrinal purity and wanting to do the right thing and trying to be an obedient, good Christian woman and all this kind of stuff. And yet I was really, really, truly in the wrong place. I wrote about that, and in that chapter I actually write about how I got to a point where I had to turn around and retrace my footsteps and find Jesus as an alternative, a different way – was there a Jesus as the way I didn’t understand? That whole shift between the wrong way and then a right way, I developed that chapter around the Deuteronomic Command where God says to the people of Israel: *“Today, I lay before you two ways: The way that leads to life, and the way that leads to death. You get to choose.”* God is inviting Israel to choose life, of course. He points out that there is this other way. So I had that in the back of my mind that powerful passage from Deuteronomy while I was writing my own story of a way that was all about grief and loss that I had to leave. I *had* to leave it in order to live, and I did and then came to a different path. I think that path encapsulates the sense of both a way of grief and an honest discussion of loss and being so theologically mistaken.

I have actually shocked readers. People who thought they knew me didn’t know that part of my life. I never talked about it because it was so embarrassingly shameful to have never believed that gay people were created in the image of God and other things that I take for granted now. It was hard to write about, but I wanted it to be part of the whole story. I think by embracing the grief and sort of telling the story of it as honestly as I could, there was a way in which I was able to incorporate parts of that story into the more redemptive side of the story, which was eventually rediscovering – because I think I always knew it – that Jesus was actually a way of love. There’s a sense of triumph there, but it isn’t the single road upwards triumph story. It’s kind of a rocky chapter, because that’s the way that our lives are. And it isn’t just a single down trajectory story; it's really a mixed tale. I’ve given myself a lot more space as a writer for that kind of true human experience, and being able to hold on to both grief and joy simultaneously.

**Steve:** I want to thank you, because I think you, and writers like you, provide a great service and a great ministry, like you talking about coming out of that circle that didn’t fit anymore. For people who go on that journey, that can be a very lonely period [and] a very lonely experience. And oftentimes, friends and family tell us that we’re making a mistake. To leave is really a solitary ... it's an isolated experience. Authors like you, Kathleen Norris, Anne Lamott, [who are] great examples, write about that so that when people are going on a similar journey, they don’t feel so alone. They have all these voices telling them that they’re crazy, and it’s like, “I may well be crazy, but I think there’s at least one other person who’s been in this spot and they got through, so I trust that I will get through.” Thank you for that encouragement that you offer to people.”

**Diana:** I’m really grateful to hear you say that. When I say I’m writing to one person, that’s often the person I have in mind: the person who feels alone or has been gaslit by their community, and who thinks they’ve lost everything. [The person] who really is The Gospel story that in losing your life, you find it. Sometimes I think we just need someone we feel is a friend, or someone we admire, to tell us that, and to say, “This is going to land exactly where it needs to land eventually. But it will be really tough along the way.” When you say that, I think about [the fact that] I’ve lost myriads of friends along the way. And there are people who are angry at me nearly every day on social media for reaching out beyond what I would call the conventional boundaries of approved doctrine to try to reach towards those people who are feeling lost. When it comes to it, I just feel like you read the New Testament, and where is Jesus always going? Jesus is always going over the boundaries of sort of what was the conventional way of seeing faith or telling the story or understanding who God was. He was always transgressing those boundaries in order to find the people who were just on the other side of the line who felt alone and cast off. If that’s where my vocation takes me, what could be better? That’s where I think The Gospel happens. I’m very grateful for that. And what I’ve lost along the way is painful, yes.

I mentioned at the very beginning of the podcast that brother of mine, he has not spoken to me for three years. Part of it is the journey of his own life – there are levels that have been disappointing to him, and so it’s created sibling tension between the pair of us. But then there was also a really big fallout around what happened in Charlottesville in 2017. That was significant for me because my daughter was a student at the University of Virginia at the time, and there were friends of hers who were in the alley with Heather Heyer when Heather Heyer was killed. My daughter actually had acquaintances, [including] one friend who was part of an environmental group my daughter was in who were badly injured that day, although not killed. My brother and I wound up having an argument about that and where God was or wasn’t in that day. My brother was quite insistent that people who were protesting the Nazis were wrong and the people who wanted to take down the Robert E. Lee statue were right. He got so angry with me that he cut me off. When people talk about losing friends and family, I know the pain of that, and I still live in the pain of that and the prayer of that every day. You keep going. You follow the path of love as you understand it to be unfolding before you. You’re not alone, even though there are certain people who may not be right on that moment of the journey with you anymore.

**Steve:** Thank you for your work which reminds people they’re not alone. You’re coming on June 19th to the Franciscan Spirituality Center to talk about your book, “Freeing Jesus.” What can people expect in addition to what we’ve been talking about?

**Diana:** I’m planning on opening up the images of Jesus that I present in the book. Those images are friend, teacher, savior, Lord, way, and presence. I think we often as Christians stop and imagine our images for God, but I think it’s a little less common to explore our images for Jesus. This project on “Freeing Jesus” has been about that: opening our imaginations to see Jesus from a number of different perspectives. I think this sort of multi-image approach to Jesus does help us to hold on to the core aspect of Christian identity. I hear so many people say, “I don’t know if I can still call myself a Christian,” or, “I don’t know what to do about Jesus.” I’ve tried to reach out toward those questions and engage them in a way that’s meaningful to me. And in the process of talking about those images, the secondary sort of thread of the day will be helping people to understand how important their own stories are of Jesus. And along the path, to provide some tools for people in reflecting on and organizing their own spiritual memoirs so that they can be more confident in telling their own stories.

**Steve:** We’re excited that you’re coming. We’re looking forward to the event. Once again, it will be June 19th [April 9] from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. If people are interested, they can register at our website: [www.fscenter.org](http://www.fscenter.org). Or they can call our office at (608) 791-5295. Thank you very much, Diana. This has been a real treat.

**Diana:** Thank you. I’m looking forward to it, and I’m very happy for the invitation.