**Steve Spilde:** Welcome. I’m excited today [because] my guest is Sister Karen Lueck. She has experience as an educator, as a pastoral counselor, [and] as an author. She has been involved in leadership of the FSPA community, most recently serving as president. It’s my pleasure to introduce today Sister Karen Lueck.

**Sister Karen Lueck:** Thank you. I’m glad to be here, too.

**Steve:** As I often begin with guests, Sister Karen, could you tell me about your family’s religious tradition. Let’s get that grounded so we kind of know where you’re coming from.

**Sister Karen:** My family is Catholic, [and is] very grounded in being Catholic. We were from a small town, a German town, in Iowa. Everybody in the town was Catholic, except a stray Lutheran here or there. The town and the church were pretty much one, so everybody was both. We were very dedicated Catholics, I would say – just being very, very much Catholic.

**Steve:** When you were young, how would you have described the word “God?”

**Sister Karen:** I think it was always, for me, it was hard to do because I think I knew that God was somebody who really cared about me at some level. But what I heard from homilies and from the church a lot of time was that I was a sinner [and] I was bad. Therefore, the only way I would be able to get to close to God is by confessing my sins and being this perfect person. I think that messed with my head and my heart for a long, long, long, long time, and it still comes up at times, I think. On one hand I was very proud of being Catholic. I was very happy [and] was inspired by the rituals and that kind of thing. But it didn’t feed my soul in other ways.

**Steve:** People who know me know that I’m a big fan of Brene Brown, and I find her content on shame to be very helpful. But I know that you were studying shame at a deep level long before Brene Brown came along.

**Sister Karen:** Yes. I could have been the first Brene Brown. My professor said I should publish my work, but I never did.

**Steve:** Society wasn’t quite ready for it at the time.

**Sister Karen:** That’s it. That’s right.

**Steve:** Can you connect some of that work you did later in your academic study to some of those experiences you had as a kid, because it sounds like that was ambivalent. There were good things about that background, but there are also things that weren’t helpful.

**Sister Karen:** As I went through life, starting in my 20s or probably before that, [I was] always feeling a sense that I wasn’t good enough. As I look back now, I do say that a lot of it came from the religious beliefs or what we were hearing in church. I spent a long time – and at times I still need to revisit that – working on that shame because I kept saying to myself, ‘No, it can’t be that. I want to be feeling like I love myself, and that other people love me, too.’ I spent a lot of time doing therapy, reading books about shame. Then, like you said, eventually going to graduate school and having that be my main focus to look at especially women and their psychology and spirituality or theology. [I] therefore got into the feminist movement more, again feeling like going into that it would sever me from the church because I knew that that wasn’t something the church was really advocating – then or now, probably. I think I had to do that for myself to feel like I was OK. And as I grew through that, my relationship with God also changed because all of a sudden, now I was a good person, so God must be loving me all the time because that goodness is inherent in me, and it’s inherent in others, too. I started seeing myself as a good person and God loving me. It’s all combined, and to this day I am still learning how that is – what does that mean when I believe that I’m good, [and] that other people are basically good and how that contributes. I’ve come to believe or know that God is with me all the time. God is the one who is loving me all the time – even sometimes when I’m not able to do that. That’s a real comforting thing, and it’s something I think that other people need to know. That’s why I’m glad Brene Brown is doing a lot of her work. It’s bringing it to the ordinary people about how we are good inside. We have to fight against anything that tells us that we’re not.

**Steve:** When you were young, that message … Certainly I know myself, [and] I know a lot of people heard the negative elements of that message. But part of what made it so confusing is that there were also positives. We were hearing these mixed messages that you’re loved [and] you’re good, but also [that] you’re bad [and] you’re evil. Which is it? Where did you experience the positive side to that? When or where did you feel closest to God when you were younger, or feel the love of God?

**Sister Karen:** I think even though my family was not demonstrative – we’re staunch Germans, and so [we’re] not as demonstrative with love – I did feel centered and loved in that way. I don’t know if I could have expressed it at that time, but I think where I felt close to God, not know that that was really spirituality at the time … I go outside sometimes and go out in our pasture that we had a creek running through there. I would just sit there and just be aware of nature. And sometimes just laying on the grass in the sun, and with my face to the sun, feeling peaceful and whole. I think later on when I was more of a teenager, I remember going into church sometimes when there was no service or anything going on, but just sitting there in the quiet and feeling something [and] feeling like, I don’t know what it was, but I think it was in awe. I don’t even know if I could have defined that as God at the time, although I think I did believe that. That’s where I found God, and where I still find God today mainly is in awe of nature – sitting in nature, walking. Now I find it in journaling now that I know that what comes out of my mouth is really hopefully what God has already put there. Every morning I ask God to let me speak God’s words. That has brought me closer, too.

**Steve:** Where did you become acquainted with the Franciscan perspective? Was it just simply a matter of meeting Sisters over time [and] learning deeper what their perspective was? Or were you really drawn to a Franciscan perspective?

**Sister Karen:** At first, I think I was really close to the Franciscan Sisters, our community Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. I have two aunts who were in the community, and so we would go up to La Crosse to visit them, so I was very familiar with the community. I was taught by them for 11 years; my last year we transferred high schools. I knew them, and I felt comfortable with them. When it was time to join the convent, then that’s where I was going to go. But ironically, at that time – I joined in the late 60s – Franciscanism was only starting to come to … There was more knowledge of that. Before that, I don’t think a lot of the Sisters even focused on Franciscanism a lot. But where it really struck me was when I was invited to go to Assisi with the leadership pilgrimage when I was in leadership the first time. Going there and going where Saint Francis walked and finding out what he said and how he loved God and God loved Francis, I remember sitting on a mountain there and saying, ‘I think I am Franciscan.’ Before that, I had probably been in the community for 25, 30 years already and knowing in my head that I was Franciscan, but here, all of a sudden now knowing in my heart that I was Franciscan. It just struck me that this is what it means to be Franciscan. I think it also went along with all the work I had done on shame and goodness to recognize my goodness, and to realize that that is what Franciscanism is: to recognize that all creation is good.

In the Middle Ages, when there were debates going on, Franciscans lost out in a lot of ways because the dominant message became that we’re sinners – that’s the basic thing. Francis always said everybody is good, and he saw that in everything – in nature, in people. I think that’s where I first really realized that I was Franciscan, that it wasn’t that I got it from being in the community. It was that I was that originally.

**Steve:** To paraphrase, what I’m hearing is that somewhere inside you, you had this desire to find this source of goodness. It was kind of a pleasant surprise [to discover that], “That’s in the tradition I’ve already committed to.” That’s at the core of Francis’ message.

**Sister Karen:** Yes. Somehow I stumbled into it, right?

**Steve:** I was blessed to do a retreat with you, a workshop that we put together. One of the pieces I found very meaningful was that you were talking about the Franciscan perspective on the Creation Story as opposed to maybe the majority view, that it’s always been this minority view. Could you say more about that?

**Sister Karen:** I usually go back to the Creation Story where it said God said it was good, or it is good, and at the end in that story, God said it is very good. That’s in the majority view, like I said, in the church often was that we’re sinners. The theology goes that God sent Jesus into the world to save us as sinners because we were bad. All of a sudden, God wanted to save us, so he let his son die so we could be saved. It never made sense to me. But the Franciscan view has always been that Jesus was part of God from the beginning. It wasn’t because people were so bad that they needed somebody to save them. It was that I think God loved us so much that at some point [he] sent Jesus to be a model for us, [and] to be who he was: totally human in loving of other people, loving of himself. That’s the message that Franciscanism gives. It’s that it was always there [and] that people were always good. We get distracted sometimes and we go in another way. We don’t keep our eye on the prize all the time, and that’s where sin comes in. Once I understood that, it made so much sense because that’s what I believed in.

**Steve:** You’ve come to, based on your own experience of life and really listening to your heart, but then really finding sources that will confirm that belief. One of the pleasant discoveries was that is in your Franciscan tradition.

**Sister Karen:** And that’s what I still find myself doing today. When I look back, it’s like, yes, I had that all along. I think all of us have that in some ways, and we just discover it through experiences as we go through life.

**Steve:** As I listen to you, the Biblical image [that] comes to mind [is] when Jesus says, “Look at the birds, look at the flowers of the field.” You don’t have to have multiple degrees to figure this stuff out. You can see it all around you. Just look at how it’s laid out before you. Even the birds can teach you what you need to know.

**Sister Karen:** Exactly. Exactly. I think if you look back, it probably is obvious, but I think we get caught so much in the word – in the way of the left side of our brain, probably – this is the linear, this is the word, this is the rule, and that’s what we lived by rather than living by both sides of our brain. Living by that, obviously, but then also living by what we were experiencing and what we were seeing. It always strikes me … I think of farmers. My dad was a farmer, and they were always aware of what was happening in nature. But then going to church on Sunday, then it was like … It wasn’t that at all. You weren’t supposed to emphasize that; it was all this what we needed to learn, what the rules were, what you shouldn’t do. It’s the balance; we’re very out of balance. People don’t believe in themselves anymore. One time I was in a place where there were a lot engineers working in a particular place. They were brilliant men; most of them were men at that point. They were brilliant, and they were doing all kinds of cutting-edge kind of technology. But then when it came to Sundays, then it was almost like they turned their brains off [and] turned their experience off. All of a sudden, it was like, “We have to listen to this kind of thing.” It has become so disjointed. We all have that wisdom. Obviously, the church has wisdom, too, so hopefully we are listening to that and learning from that also. But it’s not one or the other.

**Steve:** I oftentimes think that the key aspect of healthy spirituality is really moving from an “either/or” mentality to a “both/and” perspective. And I hear that from you as well. I hear you being led deeper into education around pastoral counseling and really wanting to discover that sense of goodness. You were getting these messages kind of from outside that said you were bad at your core, and you said, “No, that doesn’t resonate with me. I think there’s a goodness there. What’s holding that goodness back?” Is that a way of characterizing what led you deeper into your education?

**Sister Karen:** Yes, definitely. I was doing a lot of personal therapy and reading feminist books which were obviously saying women have always been told they’re bad, but they’re not. Remember, I was a principal for only three years. I didn’t really enjoy it, [being] a principal in a grade school. We were at a board retreat one time, and the question we were supposed to ponder [was], what are you really passionate about? The first answer that came to me was, “I’m not passionate about being principal.” What am I passionate about? It was what I was learning in my own therapy and reading. It was that we are good. That’s why I looked around for a graduate program that emphasized that, the pastoral counseling and looking at it from a different perspective. My community was nice and wonderful to me and let me do that, and that’s what it became. One of my doctoral theses was an experience of working with a woman in therapy. I used that whole method of looking for the good rather than looking for the negative diagnosis psychology and therapy did for so long. It’s like, “What’s the matter with them? We have fix them.” I would help her to see that there was goodness there. My whole therapy with her for quite a few years – three or four years, I think – was recognizing where the good was and what was keeping her from acknowledging that. The education then led me to help other people and move from there. All that I had learned already led me outward to help other people.

**Steve:** That really serves as a nice segue into the next thing I want to ask you about: your experience as a leader. As we’ve been talking before we started the recording, you were explaining that you keep finding yourself in these leadership positions even though you’ve never sought leadership. You’ve been kind of a reluctant leader, which, by the way, I think is a very Biblical image. Most of the best leaders were people who were reluctant to take on that mantle. But yet, I’m wondering if that’s part of why that calling kept coming to you. Your perspective was, “We need to find the good in this situation,” and organizations would come to you saying, “We need to find the good in ourselves. Help us to do that.” Is that fair?

**Sister Karen:** I think that was probably in my mind more. I don’t know when I was called to leadership whether that was in their mind. But I think a big thing was that I remember having gone through an intensive therapy program for awhile and coming back to the community. Other people had been asked to go, and there was a negative image of having to go to therapy. I had actually asked to go because I needed it. But when I came back, I didn’t hide that. I didn’t make it something like, “That was just a blip on the radar.” I talked to people about it and how I had changed. I characterized it as finding a second life; that’s what I characterized it with. I was vulnerable; I think that was a big piece. That’s what Brene Brown talks about a lot: accepting the vulnerability and seeing it as your strength. I think that’s what God gave me the grace to do. And I think when you’re vulnerable like that [and] when you’re real and you talk about things that helped you but might have been very difficult at the time, people respond to that. And they really … I don’t know if they admire that or if they just know that you’re just somebody who is real. That’s what they want in leadership. I don’t know if they translated it into finding goodness in us or not, but I think they were seeing something real in me.

**Steve:**  How much influence did you have when the last big gathering of the community, the Revolution of Goodness? I don’t know all the terminology for your different gatherings, but I know that was a big one.

**Sister Karen:** Yes, it was huge. I had quite a bit of influence, I would say. I was on the committee. I was one of the co-chairs of the committee, I believe. Yes, I did have a lot of influence on that because I just think that in our world, that’s what we’re not engaging. We’re looking at all the negative. In the last year it’s gotten worse, but it’s always about the negative. At the time, I had some experience with this appreciative inquiry. It’s kind of a view of how organizations change. What they say is that organizations don’t change by looking at what’s negative, because then you usually get more negative, like what’s wrong, and then you find it everywhere. Appreciative inquiry says organizations change when they look at what’s the best about themselves and ask themselves, “How can we duplicate this, or how can we have more goodness come in?” I’ve gotten a lot of good experience through the community; the community has let me do a lot of that. I think I was able to say, “That’s what we need today.” That came out as … People were like, “Oh, yeah.” This was the first time in this big gathering that it wasn’t just the Sisters planning it. We had our affiliates’ lay people with us, and we wanted to invite lay people to it because we didn’t want to just hold it for ourselves. If we believe that that’s so important and that we look for the goodness in everyone, as Franciscans do, then we wanted our lay people, our partners in mission, to be able to do that, too. It was a huge gathering.

**Steve:**  I was very honored to be invited to that as a partner in mission. It was such a unique experience to focus on problems – what’s good in your realm of influence, [and] what’s good in your world? Let’s highlight that and let’s celebrate the goodness, and how do we make more of it? It was really a unique event. I really do hear the echoes of that in your dissertation.

**Sister Karen:** Yes, definitely. This one woman from northern Wisconsin said, “Can you imagine …” – she was only there a day – “we’re spending a whole day just talking about goodness?” That in itself is revolutionary, because when do you get to do that? Very rarely.

**Steve:**  Tell me about the book that you shared with me earlier. You’re waiting, [and] any day now you’re going to get the first copy. Tell me about the content of that book, because I think it matches very well with what we’ve been talking about.

**Sister Karen:** The title of the book that I just finished writing and is being published right now is called “Cheering For The Good, Leading When It Matters.” Like I do with everything that I do, as you’ve noticed as I’m talking here, I bring all the experiences and all that I’ve learned into, what’s next? What I wanted to do in the book was to use my experience of leadership in the community to talk about how we can be different kind of leaders today. Again, it’s leaders who look for the good rather than leaders who are always finding out what’s wrong or looking at themselves as the savior. Everybody has that inside them. What I did was – and I don’t know how this came about – but I was a cheerleader in high school. I decided I was going to use the cheerleader as the metaphor. People looked at me when I said, “I’m writing a book on cheerleading and leadership,” and then they would look and then they’d laugh or they’d sneer and say, “I hate cheerleaders.” As I used that in every chapter of my book, I felt that when I was a cheerleader, I was with my team and was able to gather the energy of the group, of the fans at that point, to kind of speak as one voice to get something accomplished – in other words, have the team win. In a way, they’re very necessary because it’s bringing that whole energy together. All through the book, I talk about my experience in leadership; the kind of leadership that we need today, which is much more collaborative and looking for the good [and] using both sides of our brain; and using cheerleading as the example a lot of times I start the chapters out with.

In the book, I have a chapter on leadership, I have a chapter on goodness. But then it’s also the other things – like I said, vulnerability is one of the chapters. [There’s a chapter about] your inner voice. I can’t remember what I named the chapter, but it’s on our inner voice and listening to that and speaking out of that – those kinds of things. It’s kind of what I’ve been talking about in this podcast. It’s all that same thing and using my experience of leadership and giving a few hints along the way of how I did it or a team that I was working with did it, and maybe that other people can do that, too. Also in the book, I’ve included little sidebars about people who have, when I ask, “Where have you noticed the good lately?” or, “Where have you encouraged the good lately doing leadership?” It’s not necessarily about executive leadership, although it is, too. But it’s also about how every one of us is a leader and needs to claim that in order to make a better world.

**Steve:**  How do you connect that to your spirituality?

**Sister Karen:** I think that’s what I am. That’s my spirituality. How I experience God is basically our spirituality, the relationship with God. That’s what I see that I’m doing every day when I get into my cheerleader mode: looking at people and recognizing in people or recognizing in nature all the gifts that God is giving us all the time. That is definitely my spirituality. I’m living it all the time.

**Steve:**  I can see, too, where focus on goodness can even reframe what we initially might label as “bad.” These situations come, and they seem tragic at the time. But then that perspective of goodness starts to say, “How is this going to be used for good? Where is the good showing up?”

**Sister Karen:** I don’t want to come across as a Pollyanna kind of person. I do point out throughout the book that we need to grieve when we lose something, and when the bad things happen – like, let’s say this pandemic – we need to grieve our losses to do that well, to grieve well. Once you grieve well, then, as I’ve learned, you’re able to look underneath that or behind that and see what the good is in that. You don’t cut out that whole thing of grieving and mourning. Then, once you can do that, then you can move on. That’s how … Like I said, I didn’t want to come across as, “Everything is all rosy,” because that isn’t our experience.

**Steve:** Kind of bringing this full circle, knowing what you know now, if you had a chance to visit with your much younger self, what’s some of the wisdom that you would share with that young girl growing up in Iowa?

**Sister Karen:** I think one thing is, you are good and listen to your experiences and listen to where you’re drawn. That is a sign of God working through you. It’s not just about obeying something out there. It’s about learning about it, obviously, and receiving wisdom from other people. Just believe in yourself. I think that would have solved a lot of things.