**Steve Spilde:** Welcome. Today I’m excited to introduce our guest, Karen Skalitzky. She teaches in our Spiritual Direction Preparation Program. She comes to each group and presents Ignatian Spirituality, talking about St. Ignatius and the spirituality that he offered the church. Welcome, Karen.

**Karen Skalitzky:** Thank you.

**Steve:** So, tell us, who was Ignatius, and why was he important for people of the year 2020?

**Karen:** Ignatius, as you know, was a saint in the Catholic Church. He’s most widely known as the founder of the Jesuits, which is a religious order that went all around the world. I think what makes him particularly relevant in 2020 – and particularly compelling to me, personally – has everything to do with the theology of what he taught about God. And what he taught is that God is present here in our lives, active [and] moving, and that we can attune our hearts to the movement of God in our lives. He taught that in the 1400s, and it’s still relevant in 2020, especially given our current cluster of crises that keep happening. It can sometimes be hard to find God in the midst of all of that, but he taught that God is here present in every moment moving in our lives. He taught that our spiritual journey and on our faith walks that you never actually arrive anywhere. There isn’t a destination that you’re trying to aspire to. There isn’t some point in this walk where you say, ‘I have that all figured out and I’ve got it and I’m good.’ He taught that what there is, is just a constant invitation to go deeper in our relationship with God. I find that to be the most compelling piece of his theology.

**Steve:** Introduce us a bit to Ignatius, because he had an amazing personal story. Tell us who he was and the parts of the story you find very interesting.

**Karen:** I love his story because it’s like anyone else’s story. It’s just full of all these twists and turns. What he taught about God was actually born out of his lived experience, which is also what he taught. He taught that you could trust your lived experience of God, and he was very inclusive of everyone else’s lived experience of God. I think he is one of 11 kids born in the northern part of Spain. He is from a fairly noble family. He goes to become a page in the King’s Court at like 11 or 12, which had to be pretty exciting. His first big twist and turn came when the king died and he essentially lost his job. He was laid off, and he had to refigure out what he was going to do. He ends up going to defend the border between France and Spain. And he, at this famous battle which name has completely escaped me, is in a fortress defending Spain, and he’s surrounded by the French and he refuses to give up. Some people think that was really bold and wise, and some people think strategically it was completely the wrong move altogether [because] there was no way they were going to win. Either way, a cannon shoots into the fortress and it shatters his leg, and he goes home in defeat. They have to surrender, and he is carried home on a stretcher, humiliated, in pain, and suffering. Again, another general … turn in his life in terms of how he’s going to recover and what’s going to happen then. He spends time recuperating and he’s pretty bored. The story goes there are only two books in the house because he has to read something, and of course there is one about Jesus and one about the saints. He starts reading and gets compelled into it. He spends all this time daydreaming, which just seems like something all of us do whether we want to admit it or not. He spends all this time daydreaming, and he just starts to pay attention to the movement of that and he has one of his romantic notions of how he wants to win this woman’s hand back and he’s worried because his one leg hasn’t healed properly so he has them break it again and they had to reset it so he could look … appropriate to win this woman’s heart back.

Then he has these other daydreams about serving God and just going in a completely different direction. He starts to pay attention to the energy of them over time and what makes you feel good and the is short-lived, and what comes back and what gives you life. He makes a radical choice and he tells his family that he’s going to go off and become a priest, and he follows the daydreams that keep coming back to him that give him energy and give him life, and he takes on the life of a beggar in service of God and he’s ministering to people who are ill at time, much like now without insurance or coverage or access to healthcare. He’s present to them, and in that time of his life he experiences sort of high highs and low lows. He experiences time where he feels really great union with God, and he experiences time where God feels really far away. He begins to write those experiences down, and a lot of his teaching is rooted in the idea that God is present in both places, that God is present in the high highs and the low lows, and each have value, and that they’re redemptive and God uses that to transform us. He went on to write down his experiences of God, and he started talking to other people and incorporating their experiences of God and the iterated and iterated and iterated, and they eventually became the spiritual Exercises of Ignatius, which many people pray. It’s a 30-day retreat or a weeklong retreat – there are two different ways that you can do it – and I think he would have loved that. He loved iteration. He loved the idea that there isn’t one singular way to know God, and there isn’t one singular way to be in a relationship with God. What there is is this invitation to go deeper.

He takes a few more twists and turns. He tries to get to the Holy Land to see the Holy Fathers, and they basically kind of kick him out and say, “Who are you? You’re not schooled. You don’t have a degree? What are you teaching about?” I think that something like at the age of 40 he decides to go back and become a priest. He has to learn Latin, and he goes and sits a grammar school with other boys to learn Latin because that’s the only place he can learn that. He becomes a priest and he eventually starts the Jesuits, which goes all around the world. The unique thing about the Jesuits was that their mission was to serve people, and to go to be the church with the people, and to be present to everyone. It was a very sort of … Sometimes we think of things as “high church” and “low church.” He would have been kind of a low church kind of guy. I think the piece that I always found really compelling is that in his letters and in his writing he always referred to himself as a pilgrim. He too was on a journey going deeper in his relationship with God every day.

**Steve:** When did you discover Ignatius in your life? What was going on in your life at the time you discovered Ignatius?

**Karen:** I would love to say that I have a great story about that, but I really don’t. And I think sometimes that’s the way it happens. You’re off thinking you’re going to do this one great thing, and then a door opens somewhere else. I did the exercises because I was curious about them. I did them through a church group and it met every week for probably about two years. I loved the group, and I loved all the sharing. I didn’t actually care for the exercises all that much. I didn’t find Ignatius’ writing to be particularly compelling. He has a regalness about him, and having been a knight he used a lot of more military-based terms in terms of talking about God, and it just didn’t … Some of the more masculine forms of God really didn’t speak to me. Then, only as things can happen, I had a background working in schools and I coached teachers at underperforming schools and I coached principals, and I used to present in schools all the time. There is no harder audience than a group of teachers who don’t want to be in a professional development and who look at you like, “What are you going to tell us now to go do?” So I learned. I learned how to earn credibility. I was at that time in my life have a mentor say, “You really should start speaking about God.” I thought to myself, “That’s absurd. Why would I talk about God?” It was sort of about as antithetical to me as I could possibly think, and it made me uncomfortable. It made my hands sweat. I tried a few out, and they kind of went OK. I got asked to speak at a retreat house and kick off the Ignatian exercises. It was a daylong event, and they said, “By the way, the person who did it in the past was this Jesuit, and here are all of his notes.” I have never been more intimidated. I’m not even sure I feel comfortable talking about God, and now I’m going to teach Ignatius on the heels of a Jesuit? Are you crazy? I pored through every book. I read every everything that I could, and what I found was that his theology, what he taught about God, really resonated with me. It really spoke to me, and it was really easy to take my lived experience and use that as a way to teach Ignatius and build a bridge for everyone else to tap their experience with God.

**Steve:** So there was a period where you weren’t comfortable talking about God, and now you are. How did you start out? Tell me the beginning.

**Karen:** I grew up in this very devout Catholic household into my adulthood. I had an experience in my mid-30s that was really life-changing, and up until that point I actually thought I no longer believed in a God who punished. I didn’t believe that you had to say the right prayers to get the right thing to happen. Up until that event, I honestly thought that about myself. Then the event happened, and I felt really forsaken and I felt like, “What had I done wrong, and why was I being punished by God?” That really pushed me into a place of really exploring, what was my faith? What did it mean to me? What was it to me personally outside of the framework in which I grew up? It brought back experiences I had as a kid that I really hadn’t paid all that much attention to that I now lean on a great deal. I often tell people that I grew up in the church, but not in the ways that you would imagine. We were the church family and we had the priest over for dinner and we played football in the backyard with the priest and all of that. But I was the youngest; I have three older brothers. I was a huge tomboy, and so they got to be altar boys and I wanted to be an altar boy. In the 1970s altar girls were not on the horizon, and so I was told “no.” They invited my friend and I to come to the church on Saturday, and we stapled all the bulletins and we would go set up the church for Saturday evening Mass. The priest – this was the part we loved – bought us lunch. They went to McDonald’s and Roy Rogers and Burger King, and I at the age of 9, 10, 11, 12 did not know that priests dined at such fabulous establishments. I loved it. I knew that I didn’t get fast food, so I thought that this was pretty much God sanctioning fast food. But the best part was we would go when we went to set up the church, we were crazy silly and crazy curious, and we just explored everything there was. In Catholic churches, there is a room off the main part called the sacristy where they have everything for the Mass, and so we went through everything. There wasn’t a drawer we didn’t open. We played hide-and-seek in the closets where the priests kept their vestments. We pretended to bless the Holy Water. We found the box of candles for the Eternal Flame. We stood in the safe and tried to touch the gold. We were just crazy curious. I never told my mother until I was a grown adult – crazy curious. We loved to play Mass. We thought it was fun.

Our biggest coup came one day when we figured out how to work the sound system. We had the sound system blaring in this church. One of us was the priest, and my friend was always the cantor and she had a great voice and we all played our roles. This one Saturday – we did it often – this one Saturday over the whole p.a. system we heard, “This is God!” I was under the pew. I dove under the pew so fast, and my legs were shaking. There was all this screaming. Then, when everything kind of quieted down there was this really, really long pause, and we heard, “Lunch is here.” We [said], “Oh, all right,” so off we went to eat our Whopper Junior and fries – happily so. I started to think about that experience and some of these dual tracks of a church that was very human. My experience of church as a kid was very human. I remember filing priests’ sermons and seeing they got sermon suggestions, and I thought it came from God above. I didn’t know you got helpful hints, so it was very human. The church was very accessible. There wasn’t any part of that church I didn’t know, and I think often about any place, congregation – a church, a mosque, a synagogue. At our best, they’re very human, and often at our worst they’re very human. But I truly believe they were always meant to be accessible.

The other thing that story reminds me of, and was a big shift for me, was just the understanding … I learned at a really young age that God is really big. God is bigger than the sermon the priest gives on Sunday. God is bigger than the gold in the safe. … God is really big. It helped me to see at that time in my life how I was putting parameters around God and I was defining God. God is much bigger than that, and that we want to always make room for the mystery and the grace of God. That was kind of the big shift for me in terms of thinking about it in terms of my own faith. When I walked the grief, it was first time in my life I ever walked grief, when I just really allowed it. I said to myself, “I’m not going to try to push this away. I’m not going to make it go away or pretend it’s not there. I’m going to walk it, and when it’s done it will be done and I will be on the other side.” And I came out the other side, and I came out very changed with this understanding that God was really much more about our wholeness and that we’re born whole. We come into the world whole. So much of our faith journey is trying to tap back into that wholeness and bring it more to life, and bring it out into the world in the way that the world needs it.

**Steve:** How long would you say this grief journey was?

**Karen:** I would say it was probably about three-plus years. It really helped me when my spiritual director told me that a big, significant life change’s grief was three to five years. She’s also a psychologist, so I found that really comforting because there is so much pressure culturally to move on and to say you’re fine and it’s OK and [to keep] a stiff upper lip. I think what I’ve discovered since, even just in my own work as a spiritual director and holding people’s stories, is that the strength comes from walking it out. The strength comes from bearing it and from allowing it, not from pushing it down [because] it actually stays with you longer when you push it down. I never made this connection before, but I kind of like Ignatius’ image of a deeper invitation with God, like this motion of a spiral. I often to describe to people that grief is like a spiral. When you’re first in it it’s spinning so tightly. You’re crying every hour on the hour. You’re crying every day. I can remember when [I said], “I didn’t cry yesterday,” and then it widens and it widens. But you never not circle back through it. Even though it’s been three years or five years, there can still be a moment where you hit that space again and you go through it again. Maybe you haven’t hit that space in three years or two years, but you cycle back through it again. Each time you cycle back through it, you have that invitation to go deeper in your relationship with God.

**Steve:** When did you take the exercise? Was it after your grief journey? What’s the connection between those two events?

**Karen:** It was kind of in the middle of them, actually – more towards the immediacy of it. In the immediacy of the grief, I stopped a lot of things. I stopped going to church, I stopped a lot of things. I just couldn’t be there, and I didn’t want to pretend. It was definitely toward the latter part where I felt like I was kind of coming out of it. I understood that what I had thought about God before was no longer true, and that I was being invited into a deeper understanding. It’s around the same time that I started taking classes to be a spiritual director. On the heels of that two-year program is when I did the exercises.

**Steve:** The part that really seems interesting to me is that you were going through this grief journey. But at the same time, it sounds like an old image of God was dying – had died – and then like with grief, oftentimes … I like the image of the Paschal mystery. There’s Good Friday, then there’s Saturday, and then there’s Easter Sunday. We tend to skip over Saturday, which is a big part of the grief journey. There is this in-between time where it’s not clear what’s going to happen next. We know we’ve lost, and [we ask], “Now what’s going to take its place?” We just sit with open hands. It’s a really difficult time. It’s very vulnerable. It’s hard to sit there, and it sounds like similarly you had this image of God that had kind of dissolved, and it took awhile for a new image to take its place. Is that your experience?

**Karen:** Certainly, yes.

**Steve:** Your study of the exercises was part of that putting this new image together?

**Karen:** I think the exercises were just an opportunity to really open up about it in a faith-based way. And I think that by the time I stepped into speaking about Ignatius and I read as much as I did outside of the exercises, it was really pored into it from all kinds of different people that I felt such a deep resonance between my new understanding of God and my new sense of God resonating with what Ignatius was teaching, which is God is here present and everything is of value, because when you grieve something that’s so significant, I often felt like it was a waste. I felt like that time was wasted. To be able to look at that as desolation and to be able to look at that as an experience of a lot of inner working happening and shifting, that it was incredibly valuable, and that God was bigger than all of that loss that I felt … That God was bigger than all of that grief that I felt. Allowing that and being in that Holy Saturday, if you will, and being in that space and allowing it allows you to get to that Easter Sunday.

**Steve:** My own understanding of the framework of Ignatius, of consolation and desolation, it sounds like that was helpful frameworks for you as you were trying to understand these experiences. I don’t know, [because] that is my language and not yours, but it sounds like up until then what you had been taught about God really served you in a place of consolation, but there wasn’t much use there when you ended up in desolation. Is that fair?

**Karen:** That’s fair. I feel like what his theology did was to put words around an experience. And I feel like because his theology is so rooted in his own lived experience, that it validated my own lived experience and my own journey with God. It just put words around an experience and made feel a lot less alone.

**Steve:** One question that comes to mind is that you were doing this work with schools, and you were getting encouragement that you need to bring God into your talk. How did that fit in? I’m curious what it was that you were teaching that your friends thought you need to bring your faith into it.

**Karen:** Let me clarify: definitely not into speaking in schools. It was just more like, “If you can do it in schools, you can do it over here.” [It was] just different content. I [said], “I can’t talk about God.”

**Steve:** Talk about your experience doing that. I get a sense that’s rewarding in a different way than your school talks.

**Karen:** Absolutely. It’s very life-giving. It’s very, very life-giving.

**Steve:** Now your job is a little bit different. When you used to speak at schools, though, your faith would really inform what you shared.

**Karen:** Yes, it did. Thank you for that. I was trying to think about I was going to explain that. What’s similar about the two is that the work in schools, in a really struggling school, it’s actually very spiritual work. It’s really helping people to see that they can do more than they think that they can, and that the children in front of them can do more than they think that they can. And it’s helping people tap back into their instinct as a teacher as opposed to often when a school is really struggling there’s an endless array of mandates, and people feel kind of beat down and really alone and isolated in their classrooms, and the work that I did was around giving people permission to have some freedom, giving people permission to trust their instincts, connecting teachers with other teachers, looking at student work. I would often sit next to, when I would go and observe and take notes, I would often sit next to the student who was struggling the most or the student who just gave the teacher the biggest headache ever, and I would periodically record the things that that particular child would say and share that with the teacher. And they would almost always be stunned and [say], “Wait a minute – she got that? She got the answer?” And I [would say], “She did.” She might have demonstrated it in all the wrong ways, but she got the answer. It’s sort of that same notion of helping people expand and broaden the view of the lens through which they look.

What I found when I spoke … I love to tell stories. What I found when I spoke in front of teachers is that … What I got known for is I always started with a story, and the story never had anything to do with education. The story always made me vulnerable in some way. People would ride the emotion with the story, and then I could really skillfully make an analogy between whatever had happened in the story to whatever it was I was about to ask them to consider in their classrooms. Because they had gone with the story – and you know when you’re speaking when you have people, so I knew I had them – when I switched over into the education piece, they were kind of like, “Oh, yeah. That makes sense. I never would have seen it in that way. I wouldn’t have considered it in that way.” It just really opened people up to receiving, and it opened me up into receiving where people were and what their instincts were and what their feedback was so that coaching wasn’t about one more person coming in to mandate something that you had to do, but sort of an organic, intuitive process that led to a lot of great gains for students and teachers alike.

**Steve:** The phrase that’s coming to me is “lived experience” because when you first started talking about Ignatius, you shared that one of his great contributions was that his spirituality was based on his lived experience. Then when you started talking about your own life, your image of God had to shift based on your lived experience. And what I know about you is when you would go to schools, you focused the teachers and the staff [on], “You have to pay attention to the lived experience of these students. You can’t teach it the same way they would teach it in other schools that have more resources, or the students come to school with less challenges. You have to meet the students where they’re at and appreciate the gains they’ve made and the challenges they’ve overcome.”

**Karen:** I think in a lot of that you have to look at a child’s lived experience and recognize that it doesn’t define what they’re capable of. The children in front of you are just as smart and just as brilliant as anyone else. You can tap into that. The sky’s the limit [because] when a child believes you think they’re brilliant, they will always thrive. They look for the teacher who is that authentic and that real. It’s helping all of us get past biases and prejudices about who kids are or where they came from or what their homelife is like and all of that. It’s just seeing them to see them.

**Steve:**  I’m guessing your experience as a mother has shaped some of your view of these things. Could you share a bit about your experience as a mother?

**Karen:** I became a mom at 45. I often tell people that I am so grateful I was an aunt before I was a mom because aunthood is about straight-up adoration. I have nine nieces and nephews who know inside out that I adore them straight up and down, but parenthood is very, very different. I love my son deeply and profoundly. I do not always adore him and he does not always adore me, but we love each other deeply and profoundly. I think that given my son’s lived experience prior – we adopted each other when he was 3 – so given some of his lived experience prior and just how all of that played out, I think that I really learned to appreciate and see God in a minute-by-minute, play-by-play kind of moment. The first half of my life where I was kind of always looking for God in big, bold ways. I was looking for God in the big milestones of your life, the things you’re supposed to have. I didn’t have a lot of those “supposed to haves.” I wanted them, and I didn’t understand why those milestones, but I kind of looked for God in those big ways.

Certainly I had … I published a book at 37. I had milestones that were significant. I’m not trying to bad-mouth God in this situation. As a parent when it’s moment-to-moment sometimes with your child, the demands are so high, and there is a context and a history you’re trying to figure out and you’re trying to parent in response to that, you find grace in small and really beautiful ways. My son didn’t sleep through the night for the first few years of our life, so I was often awake night after night from 1 to 3 in the morning, or 2 to 4 in the morning, or 11 to 2, or whatever combination it was. And I used to pray. If you’ve ever been sleep-deprived, you know how fervently you can pray for something. I’d pray for my son to fall asleep. I’d pray for me not to get hysterical. I’d pray for me to stay calm. I’d pray for me to be patient. After a while, there was a point where I started praying for all the people I knew who were weak at that moment, and what were they doing, and why weren’t they in their bed. I prayed for the homeless teenager sitting in a bus stop somewhere scared [and] not knowing what to do. I prayed for the men and women who clean the giant skyscrapers downtown who I’m sure could think of much better place to be than all by themselves [and] cleaning. I remember praying for the parents of Sandy Hook thinking about how many nights were they awake with nightmares for the children who survived and allowing that to transform and change you, and finding God and grace in all of that.

I think my son teaches me great wisdom. I share something he said the other day with my spiritual director. She said, “I’m done. That’s all you need to know,” [laughter] because we were trying to figure out – there was a rough transition in school – we were trying to figure out a new cadence to catch him up with all his work. My instinct is just to plow through and get it done, and it’s not working very well, and my instinct, I will just admit that readily. I asked him, “How would you do it if you could do it any way you wanted to do it? How would you do it?” And he said, “I’d work a little bit, and then I’d jump on my trampoline for a little bit. I would work a little bit, and then I’d jump – work and then jump, work and then jump, work and then jump.”