

# TableTalk\_Ep6\_032824

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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## SPEAKERS

Melinda, Jim, Lily

### Jim 00:03

Welcome to The Table Talk podcast. A place where United Methodists across Tennessee and Western Kentucky can connect with one another in deeper conversation around life and faith. My name is Jim Hughes. I am an elder in the legacy Tennessee conference and have been serving churches for 48 years. And I will be your host today, we find ourselves living through a time of great noise and instability right now. Living in such a time invites our full awareness of our dependence on God, and our deep trust that God is indeed guiding us, both individually and collectively, one step at a time into a future that we neither possess nor can create. today to explore this, we are in conversation with Melinda Britt and Lily Luhan. First, before we dive in, will you mind telling us a little bit about yourself and Melinda, we'll start with you. Where'd you grow up? What is your current ministry context.

### Melinda 00:55

I grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio, and came to middle middle Tennessee, by way of college, and made good friends and met my husband there and stayed in the Middle Tennessee area, and so now have been able to call Tennessee home for longer than I called Ohio Home. And that's a new place to be

### Jim 01:23

good. Thanks, Lily.

### Lily 01:25

Hi, I'm from Nashville, Tennessee. Originally, I've lived all over the place from Seattle to Ohio, Cincinnati, and Napa Valley. And I moved back to home in 2014. And I'm a denominational but I've been a little of everything from Foursquare gospel and vineyard to Anglican Episcopal. And currently I my ministry context is a house church that we do online called then place we started out in our house around the table, and it was then placed Nashville and that's still going in a new way. But post COVID It's kind of changed. And but the one that's the most fun and is my church home is on Tuesday nights via zoom. So zoom church. That's amazing.

### Melinda 02:09

A little bit about my ministry context is I'm an ordained elder in this conference, but serving in an administrative capacity. So one of the things I'm learning is how to bring that identity to an administrative context and live into that,

**Jim** 02:27

of course, and I'm lucky to have known both of you in various ways in the past. So this is a lot of fun for me to have you here. You both have found contemplative practice as a way to find grounding amidst a very noisy world. And I find myself wanting to ask you a question. Can you define noisy for us? What does it mean? When you say noise?

**Lily** 02:51

That's great question. Noise is can be anything from like construction outside where I live, or it can be too much radio or TV or computer or phone. That's Tech Tech noise. It can be the noise inside herself of anxiety and frustration and anxious thoughts. So there's external noise, internal noise and the noise you can't control kind of like the construction

**Jim** 03:21

Melinda you have

**Melinda** 03:22

maybe noisy is the wrong word. Like maybe we should say things that are obstacles to being in, in our path to connect with God, it's

**Jim** 03:31

a good way to put them Okay. And do you have obstacles of a particular kind of Sure.

**Melinda** 03:36

traffic can be noise, but it can also be something to reframe, as time spent, alone. But there's there's plenty of noise, there are voices that that try to drown out the voice of God.

**Jim** 03:55

And so when we're talking about grounding amidst this very noisy world, tell us what contemplative practice

**Melinda** 04:04

is. For me contemplative practice is things that I do you repetitively practice that I don't have perfect for sure that I'm still learning and growing by doing them. But they're things that helped me pay attention and be fully present to the presence of God.

**Jim** 04:27

Do you have go to practices?

**Melinda** 04:30

I do. And my go to practices are definitely different than Lily's go to practices which is one thing we've discovered in our conversations together. Mine center around silence and centering prayer and praying but also I'm I'm starting to lean into more creative practices, which is something Lily's helped me do.

**Jim 04:52**

Okay, good. Lily, how about you?

**Lily 04:53**

So contemplation I think of Mary when she pondered all Are things in her heart. And so it's taking time to notice what God is doing around you and in you and being present to what that is. And for me, practices are everything from walking the dog around my neighborhood and actually praying for my neighbors, and the needs around them and getting to know them to now one of my practices is painting every day. So I do a watercolor practice of just sketching a painting or sketching or crayons every morning, as a grounding practice. That helps me and I pray while I do that, okay.

**Jim 05:35**

Well, it occurs to me in the season of lit, that we have something of a blueprint with spiritual disciplines that we all share, like prayer and fasting and those kinds of things. But I'm sure that there are other more creative types than that. How did the contemplative practice become a part of your journey? When did that happen?

**Lily 05:53**

Oh, that's a great question. I was a youth pastor and a spiritual formation director at an Episcopal Church. And in Glendale, Ohio, which is a suburb of Cincinnati. And I was just fired, I was doing everything from, from Christian education, to youth ministry, to adult education. And I had two young kids at the same time. And my boss said, You need to go to the abbey of Gethsemane and practice silence, and I'm an extra total extrovert. So my friends were like, you can't go you just that will just drive you crazy. Don't go. And I go, I am desperate, I need something. And I went for five days of silence. And silence saved my life. So this was 20 something years ago. And when I think about what I could give my younger self, I wish I started practicing silence earlier, because it takes till Wednesday for my brain to shut up. And then Thursday, I start hearing from Jesus. And then Friday, I don't really want to go home. So silence really saved my life. And then finding Celtic Christianity, about 20 years ago helped me also to look at what God was up to outside in nature. And that's really who I've always been, is I used to sit. I grew up at Woodmont Christian Church on Hillsborough road, and I would sit in the balcony and look outside because we didn't have stained glass windows and take what's got up to out there because I'm not getting much in here. So I was thinking about the trees and the breeze and I always found God outside. So and that still is how I relate to Jesus now is God speaks to me when I'm outside.

**Jim 07:23**

I spent a week at Gethsemane. We were fans of Thomas Merton. And so as a Trappist monastery. Silence is the is the language that's the language here. Yeah. And so it was challenging to do that, if you're not accustomed that, especially if you're a preacher, who makes her living talking incessantly exactly go to that was really instructive. Melinda, what about you?

**Melinda 07:48**

So similarly, the gap, Abby gets 70 is kind of a pivotal place for when I started thinking about contemplative practice for myself in a former way. But what I learned actually, was that I'd kind of had this disposition, all growing up, like I used to say things like, I pray better when I'm walking, or I, I, I can engage more with something if I have a pencil in my hand. And so I realized that that was, those are contemplative actions that help you be fully present. And so it was later in life that I started getting to put language around that. And it was through relationships, mentors that I have, who asked me the right questions, who noticed that in me, actually and said, This might help you and introduced me to practices like centering prayer introduced me to practices like walking with intentionality, a labyrinth. And so it was really through relationships and people introducing it to me that it became a part of my life.

**Jim 09:06**

Thinking back to mountain in my career was have many conversations, we had his church staffs talking about worship, and playing with the idea of creating quiet space in the service itself. And we were also petrified, because it sounded like dead air.

**Lily 09:24**

Scary, it is a scary thing to think about being quiet, because we don't have that quiet space in our real lives. And so I talked about baby stepping into silence. So if you have a baby in a car seat, this doesn't work so well. But to like turn off the radio or your you know, whatever you have in your car to make, you know, podcasts or whatever, don't have anything in the in your car, and so have see how that works for you see what you notice. And so it's noticing, what do you hear in the silence? Is it you know, the traffic noise or the construction or is it the birdsong and so it's Starting to take take a moment to kind of notice and then also talk about brain drain lists. That silence because our brains are so noisy, is taking time to like, Okay, you're, you're always going to have stuff float through your brain. So keep it piece of paper and write down this thing. It's the grocery list or the things to do, or man, I forgot that, and let that flow out of you, and then come back and focus on what's Jesus talking about today? Or what do I hear? What's that bird talking to me about today? What? What's the color, I think color is another way that I noticed God. And I was on pilgrimage. And we ran into this restaurant where there was a pink flower outside, we thought it was going to be an Asian restaurant, we walked in, and it was Italian. But the pink flowers on the outside thought made us think of, you know, like an Asian restaurant. And then the funny thing because it was Scotland everybody had on the tilts as the servers for an Italian restaurant. But the concept, but the thing that happened was we kept seeing pink flowers along that journey. And it was like a reminder of God's love. And it has become a thing for me, where when I see a pink flower, I'm like, oh, there's Jesus. And that's just has helped me a visual help of noticing what God is up to.

**Jim 11:11**

Yeah, cool. So in times of great instability, as human beings, oftentimes, our instinct is to do whatever we can to find stability, to make sense of the chaos to package it in a way that we can control. And yet, you both seem to be saying that as followers of a living God, we are invited to approach seasons of chaos and instability differently. Can you help me understand that and Melinda, I'll start with you?

**Melinda 11:38**

Well, I think one of the reasons that we resist it is fear of surrender, and letting go. Somehow we associate stability with being in control. And so that letting go holding things loosely entering into a conversation or situation with your palms out instead of closed fists, or clenched is a way just to invite acknowledge the presence of God in a moment that changes instability into complete stability. But it's that letting go that is hard is really hard for us.

**Jim 12:19**

You think we've been trained in some ways not to want to be surprised by God?

**Melinda 12:26**

Yes, yes. surprise parties, for someone who's an introvert can be really scary. And maybe that's where we're, you know, where we're saying, we don't want to be surprised. We want to know what's coming. We want to know the plan. And we want to know the the turns to take. But that's, that's not how it works. I've

**Jim 12:48**

had a colleague who once told me that, and I love the way you put this, we like to try to pay for training the Holy Spirit. So that we know what's coming and where it's coming. And that whole thing, I believe, what about you?

**Lily 13:01**

That is so great. I read this morning, sometime this week, Ed Hayes has a book called the Lenten hobo honeymoon, which is a Great Lenten devotion. But he talks about spiritual practices being the manure of prayer life. And so that that, you know, fertilizes everything. And I think that that's what we need more of, and that the more I agree with you, Melinda that that we don't have, I don't like not having control. And I feel like the last few years, we have just not been in control of anything much. And especially I've been telling people that, you know, March is when it's four year anniversary of COVID. And so we have this, you know, memory of all those things that happened, and some people are in total denial, that, you know, we don't want to think about those things. But we've had to let Jesus hold a lot of things for us that we can't control. And so I think that spiritual practices help us to let go and let God and that they help. If we center on Jesus, and love, then we're able to live in the middle of uncertainty and in the middle of division that seems to be so present everywhere.

**Jim 14:10**

For sure. And Melinda, I found myself wanting to ask you a specific question about your context. Because you're not in a local church, but you're leading a pretty complex organization. How do you bring contemplative practice into that kind of a setting? Yeah.

**Melinda 14:32**

I would have to say it might be the reason I'm upright. Right now. If we think about the last four years, you know, starting with the pandemic, but let's just look in our, our own conference, all that's happened. We've had the pandemic we've had the murder of our colleague and friend, we've had deep violence that had racism as its Motivation, we've had a leader who had a near fatal accident. We've had four

natural disasters, we've had division and heartache that we named disaffiliation. And I'm missing some things, we've had a school shooting we've been, we have all the layers of our own personal lives, and what our living life and family brings. And so if you think about that, it's a lot. It's a lot. And yet, and yet, when you practice noticing, the presence of God, it has been clear that God has been with us through all of that. And practice has helped bring that out, for me, and to hold on in somehow be saturated by it, and not just kind of like hanging on for dear life, but but noticing it, that it never left.

**Jim 16:03**

Yeah, that's really well said, because there's been a lot it really has. And I wonder whether or not most of us as clergy are even equipped, truly, to understand what our role in that is. And to help people to come to that spot, which leads, I think, to the maybe the next obvious question is, how do we help people to begin to do this. And so Lily, I'm gonna, I was

**Lily 16:27**

thinking that what you said about, we gotta let God hold the stuff for us. And so all the things you named, I have a practice that we do at the beginning of our thin place gatherings. And so I'd like everybody who's listening to do this together. And first thing is to cup your hands, like you're receiving something. Just imagine cupping your hands. And I want you to picture all the heavy things, I just feel all the things that Melinda just listed, but the heavy things of the world right now that are bothering you. war and destruction and conflict, the things across the world that we want to fix, but we can't. And maybe there are people in your lives who are hurting or suffering with illness, or job loss. And there's always the to do list. And the stuff at work that feels so weighty, it feels like it never gets done. And you can just feel that weight in your hands. But Jesus is sitting across from us. And Jesus is smiling. And his hands are already outstretched to you. And he's inviting you to pour all those heavy things into his capable hands. So actually reach over and imagine Jesus over there and just shake out all those heavy things into his hands. Jesus, now our hands are empty. And thank you that you want us to be able to receive new gifts. Thank you for holding all those heavy things for us. And loving those people in those places more than we can ever love them. Hold them for us. Don't let us take them back. Thank you for holding them. Thank you for loving us and help us truly to receive peace and new gifts from you today. And all God's people said, Amen. Amen. Amen.

**Jim 18:28**

Thank you, Lily. That was beautiful. So just a couple more questions for both of you first, what most excites you about ministry these days. And Melinda, let you start?

**Melinda 18:39**

Let's see, here's a lot to choose from. I think the the thing that excites me, well, I'll just talk about yesterday that even when people who have gone through these great hardships and periods of trauma and deep grief, that there they are full of hope, because they're relying on God who has sustained them. And that is really exciting to be around. It is the life that is coming through churches who have been through division is really inspiring.

**Lily 19:20**

Really, I think creativity I think that one of the things that the pandemic did is allowed us to be more creative by having things like zoom. I had to learn how to be experiential through screen because nobody's sitting across from me in my living room anymore. And but how do you make it participatory, even if it's on a screen, and then just being more creative? That's to me that's what our invitation is from, from God as followers of him of Jesus as to how do we create what the future could look like in love?

**Jim** 19:54

And to call us co creators is really helpful because we're not just passive person recipients in this journey, we are partners. So, Melinda, you resonate with this? Yes,

**Melinda** 20:05

that resonates with me. And creating is actually one of the ways that we get to pay attention to what God is creating in our lives. And so jumping in and and joining that effort by using creative juices that are in US are a way for us to pay attention to what God's doing, and to connect with that.

**Lily** 20:25

And oh, creativity is, is contemplative. When you're cooking a meal, when you're sewing something, when you're building something in your workshop, those can all be contemplative practices. Because you just have to give yourself permission that that's when you engage God, it's when you feel God's pleasure. And that's what I call finding your thin plate is when you like, Eric Liddell, and when he tells his sister, uh, yeah, I'm gonna go be a missionary to China. But first, I'm going to run any Olympics, because when I run it, feel God's pleasure. So those can be your contemplative practices. When you when you just allow yourself to, oh, this is where I feel God's peace and presence and, and pleasure.

**Jim** 21:08

Yeah, for those of you didn't get that reference Chariots of Fire, if you've never seen it, you might want to watch it. And to see that that spot. And I suppose I find myself wanting to follow that with one quick thing. And that is, being creative is sometimes scary for us too, because we don't want to fail. And it's okay to fail. When you're being creative. It's just part of the process that you do it. I'm saying that is that true, true or not true?

**Melinda** 21:32

Yes, yes,

**Lily** 21:34

I have an art teacher used to say it's just paint. You know, so whatever it is, it's just whatever the creative thing is that you're doing. It's, it's should be play. And that Melinda, talked about being, you know, childlike faith. We're invited to be children of children, in front of Jesus. And like, let's remember how to play again, that's also a contemplative practice is play. So go swing on a swing, go shoot hoops, something that will bring out that childlike wonder and let notice what God brings to you.

**Melinda** 22:07

Another place to begin, finding a way to practice paying attention is to begin with things that delight you, and that you enjoy. You were created, in order with those desires with those joys, with those natural inclinations of ways to enjoy life. And so, start their contemplative practice doesn't have to be painful. It's not intended to be, you know, start with

**Lily** 22:35

five days of silence. That's right.

**Jim** 22:37

And you pointed out earlier, I think that it is practice and you're not supposed to be perfect.

**Melinda** 22:42

Practice, actually practice I believe, makes permanent not perfect. Oh, that's

**Jim** 22:49

well said.

**Melinda** 22:51

You practice something over and over so you can learn and grow in it not. So that becomes perfect muscle

**Jim** 22:56

memory. Yeah. Great. Next question. What are you learning these days? And where are you learning it?

**Melinda** 23:05

I am learning that. Letting go is a place of letting go is a place a great launching place for transformation. And I'm learning it from people who don't always have the privilege of getting to say when they let go of things. And yet they still are. They're still embracing the transformation. And we can witness it through them.

**Lily** 23:35

I never thought I would say this, but podcasts are a way that I'm learning lots of new things. Because I'm an I'm not an auditory learner. And so all my friends were kept going. Have you heard this podcast? We heard that podcast now go, No, I'm not. I need to take notes or do something else. But I have really started embracing podcasts. I've learned a lot about that. Instagram is another place that I have lots of interesting things. I'm learning about practices as well as just random crazy things. But yeah, so online as a lot of things that I'm learning. And in being innate, I realized one of my practices for Lent was the wilderness since it's the wilderness that Jesus invites us to to get outside a lot more. So I took time away up in Michigan at the lake and it fed my I filled my cup up so I could keep coming back and pouring it out here.

**Jim** 24:22



Great. Is there for either of you, an author, that you are attached to that it's very helpful to you in these conversations? Sorry, you want to get one? I'm gonna

**Lily 24:35**

get one. Well, I brought a book today. There's like 600. Well, like Yeah, we can't go to one. Well, but the one I brought from home today was Mark sandretto book, The nine fold path of Jesus, which is the hidden wisdom of the Beatitudes. And Mark is a dear friend who lives in San Francisco with his wife Lisa and they are one of the people who actually live out their faith in day to day, insane, insane place which very practical ways, but the nine fold path are practices of living out the Beatitudes. And with body prayers, as well as practices of how do you love your neighbor? So that has, he is one of the he and Lisa have really helped me think practically in terms of my faith and, and practices as prayer practices as well.

**Melinda 25:21**

I think I'll talk about the one that I came across yesterday. And that is a book by Margaret Wheatley called restoring sanity. And while it's not necessarily Christian, you know, she, I don't know that she would call herself a Christian author. But it's all about practices that can help us be with one another, and be human with one another and treat each other with value. And I think one of the things that I'm learning through a lot of these resources is that we, we have impact where we are, and that more than ever, right now, we have to pay attention to the people who are right in front of us, and engage with them in a way that shows love, and grace and connection. And that's our true impact as followers of Christ is paying attention to that and noticing what we're what we're created to do in that moment. And in that space in relationship, is

**Jim 26:33**

that our way out of the divisiveness,

**Melinda 26:35**

I believe so good, I believe is

**Lily 26:37**

in front of us. Yeah, loving the people that God brings in our path, even if it's your next door neighbor, or if it's the person in line at the grocery store. How are we can even kindness right now is a almost a lost art. So being kind and smiling and compassionate to whoever you say.

**Melinda 26:57**

Yeah. And contemplative practice has helped me learn how to do that. It's something that we can learn. Very cool.

**Jim 27:07**

And I find myself wanting to follow that with one other question that may not be answerable. But why not? How would you, either of you use contemplative practice to cut through the tribalism, that prevents us from dealing with the one person in front of us? Oh, no, that's a hard question. Well,

**Lily 27:29**

I think listening, one of the things I'm learning is listening, listening to someone's story, I have a friend in the neighborhood, who I don't know really well. But he was the first person that I met him when I moved to the neighborhood. And he gave me a ride to the airport with his Uber the other day, it's a fun story, another time, but he is very different than I am. And I want to know, but I feel I feel a good connection with him as a friend. And so I want to know more details of why he thinks, what he thinks and why he does what he does. And I feel like I could have a really good conversation with him when we're very different. So. So it's finding those is taking those times to have a coffee with somebody that's different and asking the questions and listening to their story. Because we're all we're all the same. We just don't know each other stories. And when you start knowing someone's story, then you can go, then you can make connections, and then you can go oh, okay, I might not agree with that. But I really appreciate that. Thank you for sharing that.

**Melinda 28:32**

We've been guided to be more like children. And I think children are natural contemplatives because they engage life through wonder and curiosity. And along the way, we shed that. And so for me contemplative practice, I feel like helps develop and regain recapture that. And so being curious about who's sitting across from you or who's in line next to you at grocery in, in a genuinely curious way, is way to pay attention to their God given

**Jim 29:06**

gifts. You've just taken me back to Ted last year curious, not judgmental. It's why it resonated. So, as we begin to wrap up, here's a sort of a less direct question. Fill in the blank for me. Church is Lily, I'll start with you.

**Lily 29:27**

Church, well, what I say on an airplane is what do when they asked me what I do for a living. I say make church less boring. I think for a lot of people. Church can be boring because it's not about participation. But church is we are the church. So I'd say we the people are the church. Good.

**Melinda 29:46**

I was gonna say churches us. Okay,

**Jim 29:48**

I think that's it. So you get one last parting shot. Anything you want to share that we you wish we had talked about, but we didn't go ahead? Well, I was gonna

**Lily 29:57**

say we didn't talk about Sabbath. We didn't Talk about rest. And that's one of my core values. I grew up. We're real workaholic family. And but that's the thing that that God has been working on me for 20 something years is how do we rest. And Sabbath is a commandment. And I think it's one of the most broken ones. As as especially people who work in churches, we don't know how to rest and Sunday is not a rest day. It's a work day. So how do we put Sabbath practice? And I've really wished that we could, if I could wave a magic wand over church communities everywhere, I would do what my friend

and Minnesota car route, she's a Presbyterian pastor, and she took a little church, and they said, we're gonna practice Sabbath twice a month as a community, as a whole, the whole church. And then that's a lot I can tell you more about that. But it's revolutionized their whole church as as of learning to practice Sabbath together as a community and individually. And I know for me practicing rest, even though it's been really hard, and I'm still a total learner, about that has. It's what Jesus invites us to. It's the gift Sabbath as a gift. And so if I could we need another podcast talking about? Yeah,

**Jim 31:06**

thanks for bringing that up. I had actually written that down as one of the spiritual practices and I just forgot to say it, but absolutely. With a bumper sticker. I think I saw one time sometime back was look busy. Jesus is coming back, you know, it's like, which is kind of the way we operate it. Exactly. Listen, it's been great to have the both of you here. Great to see you again, and we appreciate you coming in being a part of today's podcast. If you'd like to learn more about anything we discussed today. Visit table talk the website at [TWK umc.org/table talk](http://TWKumc.org/tabletalk). And if you'd like to add to our conversation, we'd love to hear from you. Email us at [table dot talk at TWK umc.org](mailto:tabletalk@TWKumc.org). Thanks for being with us today.