

Season 4 | Episode # 21

## **Radically Ordinary Hospitality: A Conversation with Dr. Rosaria Butterfield**

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Crystal Keating:

I'm Crystal Keating and you're listening to the Joni and Friends Ministry Podcast. Each week we're bringing you encouraging conversations about finding hope through hardship... and sharing practical ways that you can include people with disability in your church and community.

Dr. Rosaria Butterfield author of *The Gospel Comes with a House Key* is joining us on the podcast today to talk about radically ordinary hospitality and share how opening our homes can be a doorway for people to experience the love, truth, and grace of Jesus Christ.

Welcome to the podcast, Rosaria.

Rosaria Butterfield:

Thank you so much. It's an honor and a delight to be here with you today.

Crystal Keating:

Well, I feel the same, and for those who may not be familiar with your story, would you please share a bit about your life and how you came to know Jesus Christ and even trust the Bible as truth?

I know you were in academic settings. You were a tenured professor at Syracuse University, a leading thinker in queer studies and writing public policy on domestic partnerships for same-sex couples. So, what drew you to believe in Jesus?

Rosaria Butterfield:

Mm-hmm right. An argument, an argument drew me to believe in Jesus

Crystal Keating:

Wow. How often do we hear that?

Rosaria Butterfield:

Well, I mean, you know, how we manage the offense of the gospel is important, right? Because the gospel does come with an offense. It calls us to die, right? So that's a big deal. But yes, so the question's always so funny because really what I am right now is I'm a homeschool mom.

I'm a pastor's wife. You know, I have a backyard full of chickens and a house full of kids and dogs. And so, it's just like, oh yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. She wants, she wants the backstory. Okay. Here's the backstory and you know, because by God's good grace, it's almost like I'm talking about somebody else when I tell you that.

Crystal Keating:

That's kinda what it sounds like. It's like, well, that was a different person.

Rosaria Butterfield:

I'm talking about a dead person.

Crystal Keating:

Amen.

Rosaria Butterfield:

And so, so let me tell you about that dead person. But I have no intention of resurrecting her from the grave and I praise God. I couldn't if I wanted to.

Crystal Keating:

Yes.

Rosaria Butterfield:

But you know, in my twenties and my early thirties, I thought I was a lesbian.

And I say, I thought I was because I think it was just a case of mistaken identity and I think that because there are two kinds of people in the world, according to Genesis 1:27. There are male people and there are female people and there actually is no category called gay people. It can describe a community. It could describe a relationship. Biblically speaking, it describes a sin pattern. It can be a sin pattern you didn't choose. It could be one that you fell into through the sin of Adam in which we are all born. But it never describes personhood.

But I was an activist and lived as a lesbian and a professor. And I was working on a book on the religious right because I was really interested in why basically people like you hated people like the person I used to be. And in the process of writing that book, I met the most wonderful person.

His name is Ken Smith, and he is the pastor and the neighbor that the Lord used in bringing the gospel to me. He and his dear wife, Floy, who has gone to be with the Lord, they were the hands and feet of Jesus, and their home was a picture of the gospel for me.

And I know we talk about pictures of the gospel in the Lord's supper and pictures of the gospel in the water of baptism. But there's another picture of the gospel that people like me really need. And that's the Christian home. And in Ken and Floy's Christian home, people of all walks came together around a meal.

And we laughed and we talked, and we argued. And then at a certain point, we sang a Psalm and we listened to Ken read from the Bible and we prayed and after about 500 meals, I mean I'd like to, I'd like to say it was less than that, but, but that's you know, like, let me tell you what. It's hard work, right?

Yeah. So, after about 500 meals, the word of God got to be bigger inside me than I. And I started to confront a very basic reality and that's that part of why I was compelled to be a lesbian, was I had no idea how to be a woman and I had never even thought about it. And, and certainly, none of the people in my life manifested godly womanhood. But now I was in Ken and Floy's house and somewhat on the edge of their church and was meeting people at their table.

And so, the long journey to dying to myself and to vivifying as John Owen would say, or to living as Galatians would say for Christ, was simply that learning that God's creational design for women has a pattern. God is the master creator. He's not gonna create a bridge that goes to nowhere.

And so, it was God himself. And the word of God that taught me that through the very patient, really ministry, and discipling ministry of Ken and Floy Smith. And then, you know, ultimately, I did walk through the doors of the church and, and really never left.

Crystal Keating:

Well, you know, you said a couple things that really stood out to me, and first is the importance of having godly examples living before us. I mean, Titus and Timothy, both talk about that, how the older women are to teach the younger women. We need patterns. We need to look at someone and say, wow, I'm so drawn to their life.

And the second is God's priority of fruitfulness, that when a man and a woman come together, there's fruitfulness out of their relationship. There's fruitfulness in a home. And what you see that theme throughout the scripture, that God is so intent on bringing forth fruit and creation and creativity.

I just never thought about that in the sense of a same-sex relationship, of what it is that comes from that.

Rosaria Butterfield:

No, it's barren, but let me back you up for just a minute. I wasn't drawn to their life. I was offended by their life. But it was also a disarming offense because I was really offended, and I had to stop and ask myself why.

You know, I mean, what exactly is the offense here? To realize that the offense was the offense of the gospel, and it wasn't really Ken and Floy that were offensive. But it was indeed the gospel was calling me to change, to give up something I loved for something that God wanted for me.

And that was a very powerful moment because I realized that in the fallenness of my emotions, we easily love things that God hates. We all do it all the time. How many times I've already done

it this morning, right? Mm. But that's sin. So, it isn't sin because it doesn't feel good or it isn't sin because I can't, you know, rationalize it, you know. We're all lawyers of our own sin, but right?

But it's sin because God hates it. And that's where the word of God comes in, that we have to realize. And this was really hard because I'm an English professor by training. So, I, I'm used to managing books. I'm not used to having a book manage me. Right, this is like, that was not the relationship I have with books.

So, so it was really astounding for me to, first of all, hear from the lips of Ken Smith and then to actually wrestle with it, that not only is the word of God true. Not only is it sufficient, not only is it inherent, not only is it God's voice. But the word of God knows me better than I know myself. And so those were the things, but I was profoundly offended by all of those things in that disarming way that the gospel works in the heart of someone who will believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Crystal Keating:

Well, I know we're talking about hospitality. But I have one more question in the sense of how did you get over the sense of, I am strongly offended and I'm gonna move toward loving Jesus?

Rosaria Butterfield:

Yeah, well, when I came to realize the nature of my offense, so as a member of the LGBTQ community, I was used to thinking of myself as the prime victim. Right? The person who was victimized. And I remember one time in particular, we're sitting at Ken Smith's table and we're singing Psalm 23. And I'm singing this line, you know, in the presence of my foes and I'm actually thinking to myself, oh, you dear sweet victim you. You know, here you are the victim amidst all of your enemies. And then it struck me, and I really do believe this was the Holy Spirit just slapping me upside the head. And I realized, no, actually Rosaria, you are the enemy at the table. Okay, you're not the victim at the table.

You're the Christ hater at the table. And you have spent your whole life thinking that you are the great advocate for the disempowered and the lonely and the marginalized. You know, only to realize that, oh, actually it's Jesus I have been persecuting the whole time. And so, that was really it.

Crystal Keating:

Wow. And here these people are, and the sense of they actually do love me, they're for me, they care for me.

Rosaria Butterfield:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. But they don't care for my sin.

Crystal Keating:

No, and God wants us to flourish through obedience and love for Christ.

Rosaria Butterfield:

Right, right. And so, the challenge is how to be close enough to someone like me, who is going to kick against the goads for a while and keep inviting her over for Thursday night dinner. That's the challenge.

Crystal Keating:

Amen. You know, and I wanna invite our listeners to pick up a copy of your autobiography, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor's Journey into Christian Faith*. So, I know hospitality was key for your journey to faith. 500 meals, that's a long time. That wasn't like hey, we're gonna invite you to our home. We're gonna share the gospel and, you're gonna come to church with us and you're gonna get saved. So, I love to talk about how our homes can be a bridge for people to enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ, especially for those in the disability community who may feel marginalized and excluded from community life.

And some may even struggle to grasp the love of God because they've never seen it lived out by others. You know, I often think, okay, we experience, this is the love of God is shed abroad in your hearts by this spirit. But then the body of Christ is to be a physical manifestation,

Rosaria Butterfield:

Yes, absolutely.

Crystal Keating:

.... of visible Lord. So, help us to understand why you're so passionate about hospitality from the person you were and the person who you are now. And, and describe what is hospitality. What's its purpose biblically?

Rosaria Butterfield:

The book itself was born out of a simple question. How did somebody, like you get to be here, you know?

Crystal Keating:

Right.

Rosaria Butterfield:

Who dragged you in and, and how did that happen? And then, you know, in the course of answering that question just in my day-to-day life with people, I realized there's probably a million people or more who have come to Christ at somebody's dinner table.

Crystal Keating:

Yes.

Rosaria Butterfield:

Okay. Like that's a big thing.

And, and Kent, my husband's name is Kent with a T, which always confuses people, right? Because, the pastor of the Lord used in my conversion, who also walked me down the aisle when I married Kent, his name is Ken without the T. But Kent with a T, my husband, he and I both came to faith as adults not raised in Christian homes.

And my husband is a pastor. And you know, how churches sometimes do without intending to, they reflect, you know the demographic of who you are. And so, it's not surprising that we have a conservative reformed and Presbyterian exclusive Psalm singing church predominantly made up of first-generation Christians.

Crystal Keating:  
Wow.

Rosaria Butterfield:  
Okay. So that's it, you know, and and so we are each other's family and we, if we didn't have our church family, our children would not have aunts and uncles and grandparents and cousins, and, you know, so, that was standard for us. In addition to that, Kent and I have adopted four children, two of our children, we adopted out of foster care at the age of 17.

I've adopted people who stand a foot taller than I do. When you adopted a child out of a gang, sometimes their vocabulary is colorful.

Crystal Keating:  
Yes.

Rosaria Butterfield:  
Okay. You know, we're a mess as that's what, what I'm saying is that we had to find a way to make sense of all of this. And also, my husband started out his first pastor was as a church planter, and most church planters, your home is the church.

And so, all of that to say the Lord made it very clear to us that we were going to be an incubator and a hospital for grace. And that was going to take place at our kitchen and our dining room table and our homeschool table. And so, I would say that we were just by virtue of our own stories, sensitive to the people who were walking through the door of the church, or kind of, peeking in through the windows and staying outside.

Crystal Keating:  
Yeah. Like I really wanna be a part of this. Not sure.

Rosaria Butterfield:  
That would include our neighbors and our friends with physical disabilities and learning disabilities in part because of our own adoption journey. And so, we learned early on that we needed to just ask people, what do you need - a ramp, great, handrail, great.

You know, and then just make those changes, you know, just do that. But it wasn't until our quirky neighbor with a lot of emotional disability, certainly across the street, it wasn't until he was arrested for making crystal meth in his house, that we suddenly realized that we were being really insensitive to the very people we lived among.

And we didn't seem to have our eyes wide open for our neighbors in the ways that we clearly needed to. So, it was a traumatic experience because obviously, we had no idea. We were his only real contact. He was a recluse. When all of a sudden, you know, crime scene tape is surrounding the house across the street. And we had, I don't know, two dozen neighbors in our front yard, demanding explanations.

You were his only friend. How could this happen? Wow. You know, we realized that that's a great time to open the doors to the neighbors and just have the conversation. And the conversation goes like this. Sin makes slaves of us all.

Crystal Keating:  
Amen.

Rosaria Butterfield:  
And the gospel is the freedom. So, we developed a lot more direct than you would normally behave in the suburbs might be the way I would say it. You know, we really did develop a kind of shorthand for talking to our neighbors about the gospel that was born out of a conflict. And that was also born out of their anger, anger at us for being friends with a dangerous man.

Crystal Keating:  
It sounds like you were intentional in using that circumstance to really bring out the truth about all of us.

Rosaria Butterfield:  
Yes. But that's cuz we had no choice. I mean, you know, here's the deal when it's 6:00 AM and you've got, you know, the drug enforcement agency knocking at your door and you have other neighbors looking in, you know. Two things, one is you're really thankful you bought those Lands' End pajamas and, you're pretty much standing there in a turtleneck and sweatpants anyway.

So, there's, there's that. Yeah. But the other is, you know you can either open the door and have the conversation. Or you could shut the door and tell yourself that, it's a good thing you're not like the evil meth addict across the street. You know, pick. Yeah. You know, and then, and then you've got your children staring, watching at you. So what lesson are you going to give them? A lesson of faith that says, well, faith advances into darkness.

Okay. Faith doesn't sit here in the comfort of the house and in the comfort of the church. It advances, it pushes. The light pushes into the darkness and dear daughter, dear son, this is what it looks like. Take my hand, come with me. The Lord will protect us. Or you can, you know, say, oh, evil company, perverts. We're just gonna close our shades.

And, and I'm not saying evil company doesn't pervert. It's just, it's a judgment call. Because really the sin that's gonna undo me the most is mine, not my neighbors. Even if my neighbor's sin has crime scene tape wrapped all around it.

Crystal Keating:  
Yes, that's right.

Rosaria Butterfield:  
The other judgment call is the question of, what next? Because at that point, Kent and I were ready to open the doors. And this is why I want people who are listening to this, please don't think I'm saying everybody has to live like this. This is like a mission field.

And people prepare to go to a mission field. People learn a language and they get certain shots, and they prepare their homeschooling materials for a long journey overseas. The Lord prepared us for this. Not every house is prepared for this. Our house hasn't always been prepared for this. You know, when we had infants who were health compromised from foster care or my Asian mother on hospice, we certainly were not doing this.

So, the point isn't that every Christian house is living like this. The point is that some are, and those that are, are outposts of the church of Jesus Christ. It's not like, oh, you know the Butterfields, they're so gifted. No, not necessarily.

But right now, our house is an outpost of The First Reformed Presbyterian Church of Durham.

Crystal Keating:  
Amen. That's so good.

Rosaria Butterfield:  
And our children are on board. Our children were old enough at the time to really understand. And they both had made, my two youngest ones, had made professions of faith. And so, we would sit them down and have hard, you know, this is what it looks like. This is what we're up against. Yeah. And you know, sometimes neighbors were really mad and sometimes....

Crystal Keating:  
Did they feel threatened?

Rosaria Butterfield:  
Yes, of course, they did.

Crystal Keating:  
Like, I don't feel safe.

Rosaria Butterfield:  
Yeah of course. They felt threatened.



They didn't understand how we could be friends with somebody who turned out like this. And then over the course of just opening, you know, you start to open your door. It's open that you get people who come in the door and say things like, hey, I heard this in the Bible, and I hate it and I wanna know why you people believe it.

Crystal Keating:  
Wow.

Rosaria Butterfield:  
Or I have this neighbor who is the sole caregiver of two special needs children. And he now has stage four liver cancer. What kind of a God does this?

Crystal Keating:  
Right, right. Yep.

Rosaria Butterfield:  
Now it's helpful, you know, my husband is a pastor. So, that's obviously a big boon in trying you know. If your life, all of a sudden becomes a systematic theology exam, along with an apologetics seminar, all wrapped into one before the casserole is out of the oven, it helps to have a seminary degree.

Let's face it. But it also was educating for the rest of us and not because we can answer people's questions. I mean, let's be clear. It will be the Holy Spirit who will show up in people's lives. But what we can do is open the door, bring them in, feed them a meal. Open the Bible, read a chapter, sing a Psalm, ask for prayer requests, pray and send them home.

Yes. That's what we can do. And then we get to do it again the next time. And I think what's challenging for people sometimes is the regularity of hospitality. Entertainment is what happens when you look in the calendar and you look in your checkbook and you say, oh, this Saturday would be a great time for a pizza party.

Crystal Keating:  
Right.

Rosaria Butterfield:  
And hospitality is when people come anyway.

Crystal Keating:  
Yeah. Well, and let's talk about that. How is true hospitality different from entertaining? And, you know, I just thought that you mentioned that your home became a hospital, which is you know, part and parcel of the word hospitality.

Rosaria Butterfield:  
It is.

Crystal Keating:

How is that different from, I want my home to look good? I want people here. I wanna put out the perfect linen and the dishes. I mean, talk about the difference.

Rosaria Butterfield:

Yeah. Well, in a hospitality home, host and guests are both stakeholders. Obviously, host does a lot more than guest, right? In the same way that parents are gonna do more than children and teachers are going to do more than students. I mean, part of the station of our relationships implies a profound inequality that grownups are just used to. So, part of it is grow up, be a grown-up, you know, accept it. It's okay.

And the other part is the point isn't that the dishes match. Okay. The point isn't that the meal is great. You know, the point isn't that there isn't cat hair in the mac and cheese. I'm sorry to report that does sometimes happen. Um, real life. That's right, real life. The point isn't that, oh, people are arriving and I'm folding laundry at the dining room table.

The point is ....

Crystal Keating:

It's so relatable, honestly.

Rosaria Butterfield:

Well, the point is Christian's roll with it. Everybody knows what to do with laundry if it's on the dining room table and people start to arrive. You shove it back in the dryer. Everybody knows that, that you know, you don't need a blog to tell you that. That's called common sense. So anyway, I.

Crystal Keating:

You know, I think of it like, the goal is not to impress, but to bless.

Rosaria Butterfield:

Yeah, absolutely. It also means that people can help with that. So, if you're having a barbecue and you run outta hot dogs, you just say to the person who's parked last in your driveway, go to Food Lion and buy hot dogs, please.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah.

Rosaria Butterfield:

Oh, you're Bob. Nice to meet you, Bob. Go to Food Lion and buy hot dogs, please. You know, I mean if what we're trying to do is put the hand of the stranger into the hand of the Savior. We need to recognize that these people are not blank slates, that they come with gifts and questions, and interests. And so, we're gonna build this meal together.

We're going to build this conversation together and that's true for a church as well. The integrity of a church is based on people genuinely sharing both their resources and their needs.

Crystal Keating:  
Yes.

Rosaria Butterfield:  
It can't be one way.

Crystal Keating:  
Thank you for listening to part one of my conversation with Rosaria Butterfield. Join us for our next episode to hear part two.

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