

Season 4 | Episode # 22

The Power of Hospitality: Finding Healing and Wholeness in Community

Dr. Rosaria Butterfield

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.

In our last episode, Dr. Rosaria Butterfield, author of *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*, joined us to talk about radically ordinary hospitality. She shared how opening our homes can provide a doorway for people to experience the love and grace of Jesus Christ. Rosaria was once a committed unbeliever, a tenured professor at Syracuse University, a leading thinker in queer studies, and a practicing lesbian. Then, God used an invitation to dinner in a modest home from a humble couple who lived out the gospel simply and authentically to draw Rosaria to himself. If you missed our previous episode, you'll wanna go back and listen to hear part one of this conversation.

Rosaria, how did you see kindness and hospitality softening your heart to the Lord? I really wanna get into like the spiritual benefits of being together, sharing life, being vulnerable with one another. I mean, you came from the LGBT community.

I mean, when we think about pictures of some Christians with their signs, the posture that Ken and Floy took with you was not that. So how did kindness lead you to the Lord instead of aggressive confrontation, you know?

Rosaria Butterfield:

Right, right, right. So let me, let me balance that out. So, you just shared with me something that is an impression people have about my story. It's not totally true. Okay. So let me, let me clarify. I was a gay rights activist. I had actually met the elders of the church while I was holding signs. You know what I mean? Like I, I knew where Christians stood, and I knew they believed I was living in sin. I wanted to understand why reasonable people believed that. I wanted to understand because I also knew them as like, you know, neighbors, functional people. They didn't beat their children or starve their dogs.

You know, they were reasonable people. So, I wanted to understand that which ultimately meant I wanted to understand what Christians thought of sin and grace. So, I think people sometimes just think that Ken and Floy and I, just from the very beginning, we just talked about, you know, rainbows and lollipops and cuddly kittens and, and not at all.

In some ways, I looked at Ken Smith as my unpaid research assistant for the book I was writing. Right. Why do you believe this? And what Ken said to me was really interesting. He said, Rosaria, I can't answer your question because you don't know enough about the Bible.

Wow. Now, he said that to a professor who appreciates that. Like, I know I don't know enough about the Bible. That's why I'm talking to you, Bucko. Right, you know? And so, so why don't you tell me what I need to know? Yeah. He said, great, great. I have a lecture.

Crystal Keating:

He could have used that opportunity to just unload on you, but he didn't.

Rosaria Butterfield:

Well, but I don't know very many pastors who would. I guess like I just don't. You're having an intelligent conversation. The question is the hermeneutics of scripture. The question is, why do you believe homosexuality is a sin?

The answer is, the Bible says so. The question is, why do you think the Bible is true? The answer is, that's gonna be a long conversation. Are you ready? Right. Right. Okay. Yeah. And so, I had to decide. So, then the ball was in my court, you know? And in the same way that somebody came to me and said, you know, I really wanna translate Virgil.

Great. You have a few years of Latin to study. Are you ready? I mean, you know, it's a simple question. Yeah. There's preparation. And so, he then gave me a reading assignment, which led to many reading assignments. And one of the things I learned after I've read through the Bible multiple times and Ken Smith gave me a lecture on what the Bible is and what it means.

And I took notes on the lecture, and I truly came to realize Romans 2, God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance. But it was not a quick conversation, but it was also never a fluffy conversation. I would say we don't have very fluffy conversations. People come to us with hardball questions, and they lay it at my feet. And then the big challenge, you know, for us is to figure out what are private conversations and what are public conversations. Because what you need to do is give people enough privacy to come to Christ without shame, without the shame of the fear of your neighbor if that makes sense.

But on the other hand, some questions are very, very helpfully public conversations. And so that's just part of the wisdom side of this, which we obviously fail at all the time around here, but.

Crystal Keating:

But you're, you're moving forward, and I think that's the beauty of when you have a relationship with someone, when you overstep or under step, you can even say that you know what. Yeah. And that builds trust.

Yes, it does. You just keep it; you keep the conversation open. So, I wanna talk about you know, how does your family interact with those who may be hostile to Christianity in your own home

and, and this concept of the power and confidence we can have when we choose to fear God, instead of fearing man. I really do think they go hand in hand. I mean, the scripture says much about the fear of God and that the fear of man proves a snare. It's a trap.

So yeah, absolutely. You've talked about this before and I think it's actually like so pervasive in our culture. It's almost acceptable, like to fear man almost is equated with like a kindness in a way.

Rosaria Butterfield:

It's weird. Yeah. It's very weird. Talk about that. So weird. Well, you were just referencing Proverbs 29:25.

The fear of man brings a snare. Yeah. But whoever puts his trust in the Lord shall be safe. And what we need to remember is a snare is an instrument of execution from which you don't extricate yourself. Okay. You're the bunny and you're stuck. You're trapped. You're trapped, literally you're dinner.

And I think part of how this has come into play right now is the church is too many decades having failed to embrace a good and godly offense of the Gospel, loving their neighbor, but in truth. When you have union with Christ, you don't need affirmation from the world.

Crystal Keating:

Hmm. Freedom in life comes from being affirmed by the Lord. This is who I made you to be. This is the way you should walk in it. This is for your good, yes. This is a blessing. And you say, okay, I think that's where I found freedom from fear of people.

Fear of man, fearing the Lord is like, Lord, who have you called me to be? And so, when I encounter someone who doesn't like what I'm doing, I can at least know I'm obeying you. I'm walking in love, right? I'm walking in obedience and there's a lot of freedom in that.

Rosaria Butterfield:

That's true. That's right. And there's fellowship in suffering with the Lord, too. That's your you know, Philippians 2 moment, and you know, we have had people, really come after us in our home. We had a friend who fell in love with an unbeliever and wanted to marry him, brought him to our home. And we were just meeting him. And we were having dinner as we always did.

And then we were about to read from the Bible and the passage that Kent was reading that night was Luke 14 and this man freaked out. I mean, he did. He just freaked out and he turned right to our children, to my, my children and said, don't believe your parents when they teach you that. That is not true. Don't believe them. And then he stormed out of the room, and we turned to our friend who is still sitting there in tears.

And we said open your eyes wide and look at the man you're marrying. And she's, you know, apologizing profusely to my children and the kids were pretty shaken. Yeah. But you know, like

all of a sudden, they had to apply faith to their life, and we should not withhold our children from that opportunity to do that at the dining room table. Mm-hmm, it's like things

Crystal Keating:

Mm-hmm, it's like things that Jesus said are coming true right before our eyes.

Rosaria Butterfield:

Right before our eyes. And yes, it was scary and hard and painful and miserable. And your tummy hurt, and you wished it wasn't like that. And I mean, all of those things are true. There's a great deal of discomfort but compare that to the cross. Yes. Compare that to grace. Right. It is not always pleasant. Yeah. In fact, sometimes it's downright unpleasant.

Crystal Keating:

Well, and that is part of really looking at what it means to follow Christ.

Yes. And I think that's why we need examples like you and your husband. You know, let's talk about just normal struggles of, I can't do hospitality cuz my place isn't big enough or I'm an introvert. Right, right, right.

And inviting people over drains me. It feels awkward. Right. I know, you know, we talked about hospitality isn't meant to be a burden, but a bridge to the gospel. Right. So, what do you say to somebody like that?

Rosaria Butterfield:

Well, the first thing I'd say is come over to my house and help me then with my hospitality.

Great. Okay. And, and especially that would be the case if a wife tells me I really wanna practice hospitality, but my husband doesn't want me to. Well then don't. Here, let me help you. Don't. But come over to my house because I need you.

Crystal Keating:

Well, and that's that whole idea of community and it makes me even think about that idea of individualism, like every command is for just us. We have to do by ourselves rather than this is what we do as a church. This is a body and you provide a part and somebody else provides a part. Yeah.

Rosaria Butterfield:

Yeah. Yep. Absolutely. Absolutely.

So, a very successful hospitality home, by successful I mean that, it really is an outpost of the local church, has a number of people in it who don't get their mail there, you know? Okay. A number of people, they, you know, maybe a couple of elders from your church or you know, some of the folks who really have a heart for first gospel contacts. And you know, quite frankly, it's easier for your neighbors to walk into a party than it is a quiet gathering where you're already seated at the table.

Crystal Keating:

You know, that's really true, like oh no, the pressure's on me to keep the conversation going and no.

Rosaria Butterfield:

Yeah, this might be awful. So noisy. You have to tell people to be quiet so that you can hear the person next to you. Yeah, that's an awesome hospitality home. Yeah. Yeah. And let's not forget the children. Okay. This isn't about grownups. I cannot tell you how many children in our neighborhood have grown up at our table. And, and I tell people at this point too, cuz many of them are older teenagers, and I say, well, you know, the gospel comes with a house key, but it also comes with a chore chart. So, you have now eaten, you have eaten here every night this week, Bill. Here's the vacuum cleaner.

Oh, love that. So don't underestimate the kinds of challenges that our young people are facing. And if they're hanging around and they're hearing you, they're watching you, they're watching you love your neighbor but speak the truth.

Crystal Keating:

Yes. So true. Rosaria, I wanna ask you, you know, what are some of the ways that you prepare your heart for ministering to others in an age where we're experiencing tremendous burnout and depletion?

I mean, there's so many things that grab for our attention. How do you keep yourself strong and encouraged?

Rosaria Butterfield:

Share something that's not a Bible verse, but if you wanna print it on Christmas paper this year, you may. Lower your expectations, increase your joy. Amen. Okay. So, I mean, sometimes we'll have a lot, like last Lord's Day we had about 30 people here.

All right. I looked at the situation and I realized, you know, what? Some of us were not going to eat dinner. Hmm. Okay. And I was going to be one of those. It's very simple. You just, you figure it out. You, you decide you're the grownup. You actually decide you're the grownup in the room and you don't expect to be served and you don't expect other people to serve you.

And you prepare, I mean, obviously, you know, I mean, I try to prepare for fellowship meals, but sometimes things happen, and we've got extra people. So, you know what, you, you work it out. That's good. You eat later. You, you make yourself a peanut butter sandwich in the kitchen.

You, you get it, figure it out. And then I'm saying, I do that every week or anything like that, but, but you create a standard of sacrifice that is not a burden but is indeed a contribution.

Crystal Keating:

Well, instead you're focusing on the bigger picture too. I mean, that's what I hear.

Rosaria Butterfield:

Yes, of course. And that's what grownups do.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah. Is the goal, the food? No, it's the relationship.

Rosaria Butterfield:

Exactly. Exactly, exactly. And so be a Christian who's mature. One of the things that really struck me when I first came to faith was realizing how immature I was and realizing that sin makes us infants. It just, it just infantilizes us.

Crystal Keating:

How interesting. That is so true.

Rosaria Butterfield:

So, I say, grow up. Lower your expectations, you know, figure it out.

Crystal Keating:

Yeah, that's so good. Well, as a new Christian, you quickly realize the church was on a starvation diet of community. And I completely agree. And many people in the church are facing deep loneliness, isolation, and feel unknown. They feel disconnected from others. So why do you think this is the case?

Rosaria Butterfield:

Yes, I do. I think because people are afraid of conflict. Christians have decided to deflect the intimacy of hospitality for the ease of church programs. Mm. You know, like, oh, we have unsafe neighbors. We have a program for that. You know, oh, we have, we have unwed mothers.

We have a program for that. Right. Well, maybe we don't, you know, maybe we have a home for that. Maybe we have a relationship for that. And, and so I think we've aired too much on politeness, if that makes sense. Maybe we haven't wanted to get into people's business. But again, what happens in the home is so lovely because it's private and it can be private. You know, you realize maybe somebody really needs some one-on-one time and then you say, well, just come over on Tuesday.

Nobody's coming over tonight. You just come over. I wanna hear what your heart is on that. And the other thing too, is that when you are close in with people who are maybe living pretty reckless lives, it's hard to minister to people who are in the emergency room every other day. It just is.

Yes. Okay. Like, in fact, I've even said to people, they'll say, oh, we're sorry. I wanna have a really long talk with you. You have to just not bleed on my couch for at least 10 days in a row. Right. Okay. You know, I, I have my standards they're low, but I have them. Yes.

But I think what you don't realize is that maybe some people actually need to come over every night. And maybe what happens is, if he's at your house fixing dinner, he's not on the computer, on pornography on the internet. Loneliness breeds all kinds of things, all kinds of sins. And so, part of what hospitality can do is just interrupt that in the most obvious way. Amen. And that's, if you're walking the dog, you're not on internet per you know, like you just, you can't be in two places at once. So here you go.

Crystal Keating:

Well, and true connections, God's designed deep friendships and relationships to be the joy of life. And I think when you, you know, when we talk about like, you know, a greater affection, it's not about just don't sin, don't sin, don't sin. It's that God has something so much more beautiful and fulfilling and satisfying for you. And I believe that comes in knowing people and being known. And, you know, I think that's where hospitality really is spiritual warfare.

Rosaria Butterfield:

Absolutely. Absolutely. And yet in the best of all ways, it is not a one-way street. I mean, I would definitely say that you are the one, if it's at your house, you probably should wanna make sure that you have to the best of your ability to do it, enough hot dogs on the grill. But you will benefit as well.

The Lord will grow you and deepen you and, and the joy. Can I tell you the joy of seeing the neighborhood kids who were in trouble, you know, three years ago in church today and in the Lord. And you know, I mean, at some point they get to be taller than you and stronger than you and helpful.

Right. And so, it's just, it's such a joy to see that and to know that you are a bridge and bridges get walked on and that's okay. The Lord will build you up. Mm-hmm. So it is, it is a powerful thing, because there's a great deal of both giving and receiving. Yes. Yes. Even when it's not equal and nothing ever is. This is the great, it's the great, the great...

Crystal Keating:

Exchange. Yeah. And that's where we receive from Christ. You know, as we finish our time together, I wanna ask you one more question, and this is really about the church. You know, what are some ways the church can become a place where people no matter their ability or spiritual battle can become a safe place to share struggles and sinful choices without fear of rejection and condemnation?

Rosaria Butterfield:

Right. Yeah. And I would say that's where hospitality is the bridge. Because ultimately the worship service on the Lord's Day is to give God his worship that he has called. So, the worship service is actually not the place for Rosaria to share her testimony or for the neighbor next door to talk about what, you know, and, and actually in worship, we grow. The more that we worship God, the more that we grow in our faith and in our love, and in our knowledge.

And what is God's will for your life? That you will grow in sanctification and that your faith will maintain until the end. Amen. That you will grow in knowledge and righteousness and holiness of our Lord Jesus Christ. And therefore, Lord's Day worship is for worship. But every other day of the week is for connection and for serving and forgiving and for peeling a lot of potatoes together and for picking up the neighbor's kid at the bus stop, and for returning lost dogs.

And that's what every other day of the week is for. But if somehow you just think you need to be a Christian on the Lord's Day, then all of a sudden, the Lord's Day has too many tasks in it to do anything. So, we get to live for the Lord every day. Amen. That's right. And we get to do it 24-7.

Crystal Keating:

That's right. Yeah, it's the relationship. Dr. Rosaria Butterfield, she is the author of *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*. Thank you so much for joining us on the podcast. You have given us some great words of discernment and wisdom and encouragement and, just so appreciate you and your ministry.

Rosaria Butterfield:

Well, thank you so much. I so appreciate you and Joni and Friends and may the Lord bless you richly.

Crystal Keating:

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