

ASHLEY: Our last show was about finding a spark of common ground when speaking to strangers.

RICHARD: And this time, we talk about the joys and challenges of friendships.

REV. DR. LATRICIA: Friendships are important because friendships are life-giving. Friendships are like breathing, and especially with people that are different or have different perspectives, we get to grow together.

RICHARD: This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Friendships are a vital part of our lives. They provide love, support, and a sense of belonging. Sometimes friendships help us see each other more clearly. They can also be challenging when our views diverge.

RICHARD: In this show, we draw on the wisdom of two religious leaders who are friends themselves, a Catholic priest and a Protestant pastor. Father Tim Holeda leads St. Thomas More Co-Cathedral. Latricia Scriven is pastor of St. Paul's United Methodist Church. Both are in Tallahassee, Florida.

ASHLEY: Our guests have a perspective that most of us don't. They grapple with moral questions in their day-to-day work that many of us never really think about.

RICHARD: And they often draw on the wisdom of ancient texts to help them navigate our modern world. Both Latricia and Tim are members of The Village Square's God Squad. This is a politically diverse group of faith leaders in Tallahassee who gather together to discuss prickly topics where faith intersects with politics. And thanks to The Village Square for making this podcast possible. We have links to them and their work on our website.

We began our interview by asking Father Tim Holeda what friendship means to him.

FATHER TIM: What does friendship mean to me? I think, on a fundamental level, what gives it value is that somebody who chooses, in freedom, to be around me or to know me, to be in relationship with me. They are not doing it because of money or because I can offer them something in terms of power. They're not using me.

I have many friends, and if someone asks me, "Why are you friends with them?" I could list all these things, perhaps, like, "Oh, well, he also likes to fish," or, "We share some of the same interests," or something like that. But there's something deeper than all of that. I just like them. I just want to be with them, and they want to be with me.

REV. DR. LATRICIA: I think, for me, friendship, the words that come to mind are safety, community, love, and mutual exchange. So, when I think of friendships, I think of home. I think of spaces where I can be totally and completely authentically myself. The other person can do the same. We engage in a mutual exchange that feeds both of us or all of us.

RICHARD: Why are friendships important to you, and especially friendships, maybe, with people who don't always agree with you? Latricia?

REV. DR. LATRICIA: Well, first, I'm a people person, so I like people. And, also, friendships are important because friendships are life-giving. Friendships are like breathing. Friendships give me the ability to see and be seen, to grow, and especially with people that are different or have different perspective, I get to grow. We get to grow together. I think of the phrase, "I am because we are because we are, therefore I am," that my reason, my existence depends on other people, and other people and creation depends on my existence. And so that's why it's important. It's life. It's life.

ASHLEY: Father Tim?

FATHER TIM: I think part of the human condition is the need for relationship, and both Latricia and I are Christians, so our faith teaches us that. In Genesis, it says, "It's not good that man be alone," and so He creates a suitable partner for him. So it's important for me because I need it. I'm a social person. I'm not happy totally by myself. I need friends in my life. I need my parishioners. I need the Lord. Ultimately, for me, having community with God in prayer is extremely important with me.

And then people who disagree with me, I'm fascinated by the other. I'm fascinated by my friends. I'm fascinated by humans. As Latricia said, too, she loves people. I do love people. They drive me crazy at times, but I'm sure I drive plenty of people crazy at times. But I'm very fascinated, especially when somebody doesn't see things the way I do. And my joke is that I wonder how people could come to different conclusions because I'm right, so they should have the same opinions I do. And of course, I mean that in jest.

I want to have an opportunity to grow, and so I think it's important to know, okay, there's so much more to know. There's so much more to learn. And being around people who may see things differently, I'm fascinated. I want to know, "How did you arrive at this?" I have friends that are atheists, for example. I'm very fascinated. How do you arrive at this conclusion? I want to know about it. And they're fascinated by me, like, "Why is it you're a Christian? Why did you become a priest?" There's something, I think, really beautiful there for all of us.

RICHARD: Well, talking about seeing things differently, Father Tim, our show is Let's Find Common Ground, and we often talk about politics. But do you think that many conversations today focus too often around divisive topics such as politics, religion, or money?

FATHER TIM: It might not be the frequency of conversations is the issue, but maybe the level of importance that's been given to them? I live here in Tallahassee, and we have a city. We have a county commission. We have a mayor. There's a sheriff. There's local officials here, and what's amazing is that I think if we're going to be super interested in politics in our community, that's what we should really be focused on, is these things that actually affect us in a real way every day. But the conversations tend to be what's brought to us by the national media and what we're told is important or whatever.

It's an amazing thing how sad or how happy people are based on some of these national elections, where if I recount to you my entire day yesterday, which was pretty long and beautiful, not once did the current occupant of the White House or Speaker of the House or Congress or whatever party -- none of that affected my day yesterday. So why are we always talking about that, and why does that become my identity? And why is that so important that it could determine friendships and relationships or how I see the world?

ASHLEY: Latricia, how do you feel about that?

REV. DR. LATRICIA: I think, on a large level, yes and no, so let me tell you. We have a need for belonging and love, and I think that in our dysfunctions, we find deep belonging along lines that become divisive and in ways that we sometimes don't know how to come out of. So we find deep belonging around, "I'm a Democrat," "I'm a Republican," "I'm an independent," "I'm this or I'm that," and because our identity and belongingness is so steeped in those terms and in those boxes, I think that people begin to talk about it because that's what they have. And we know that media has to sell things, right? Ratings have to happen.

And so the more we talk about things that divide, the more that happens, and we tend to just follow the leader that's not great. But at our deepest level, I really do believe that people on a quest for belonging find belonging in silos, and we have not learned how and sometimes have not exhibited the emotional capacity to go beyond these small groups to embrace otherness and to belong to an even larger humanity.

ASHLEY: Can I just ask you -- this is personal to you, Latricia, but you're a Black female pastor. I imagine that you've ministered to many largely white congregations. What is that like?

REV. DR. LATRICIA: What in the world? Ashley, I can tell you, and I serve as the senior pastor of one now, it's been great, and there are moments where I recognize that we -- and this is humanity in general and specifically where it concerns race -- sometimes, because we don't have the same experiences, traditions, histories, we are literally seeing through a different lens. It's nobody's fault that we do, but I get to bring a different perspective to the table and say, "Let me show you how I'm engaging this."

And so I have actually found it equally rewarding, number one, because it's people. I love people, and I get to do the thing that I love. And, when we hit up against cultural things that are different, and we're seeing through a different lens, I get to say, "Hey, have you considered it this way?" and watch people go, "No, I never did have to see that." One thing that helped me get there, more than anything else in my life, is my son, who is now 20, was born with cataracts. Last year, he got his cataracts removed.

When he got the cataracts removed out of the first eye, he walked outside, he looked up in the sky, and he said, "Oh, that's what y'all mean by leaves." So here is a 20-year-old who knows what a tree is, has described the tree, but suddenly, because he is literally seeing through a different lens, he's able to see what he's never seen before. I think that we walk through the world through our lens and our experience, and so I have found it deeply rewarding to serve in these kinds of spaces because we get to share perspectives.

RICHARD: As the Bible would say, I think, "Remove the logs from your eyes."

REV. DR. LATRICIA: Yes. It's something because I just preached that recently, and I thought, "Why is it so difficult to remove the logs from our eyes?" I think it's because the logs are growing internally and then extend out. So we don't even know that they're there because sometimes the logs are formed by our insecurities, by our fears, by our desire not to be fully seen because we may not be accepted and loved by others if they see the flaws and imperfections. So, because this log is growing from the inside and then extending outward, we've lived with them for so long, we don't see the log. Other people see our logs clearly. We see theirs clearly. But because we've lived with ours for so long, it's become such a part of us.

RICHARD: Father Tim, have you preached about removing logs from your eyes?

FATHER TIM: Absolutely. It's kind of a fascinating, kind of a challenging thing that happens in our tradition, in the Gospels, which is that some people recognize Jesus, and some don't. And Jesus doesn't fit into any particular team. I think what we were talking about earlier with politics, I think it's devolved into similar to what team sports looks like.

I'm in Tallahassee. I'm a big Florida State Seminole fan, have been all my whole life, and so, if someone says anything positive about the University of Florida Gators, I'm kind of like, "Whatever." I don't want to hear about it. They can't do anything right. If they have a great victory or a great comeback or anything like that, I'm not going to see it because they're not my team. That limits me. That might work for sports, but I think, in the rest of life, it's not good. I'm very afraid that, one day, I'm going to miss Jesus in my midst and because of my logs in my eyes, that I'm going to miss something happening because I'm stuck in this particular way of thinking.

So I do preach about it. I think a line I heard when I was in philosophy studies in seminary was, "We can't take our eyes out and look at them." I think that's a challenge that we all have, and that's where friendship can come in because they can see my eyes. Maybe they can see this lens I'm looking through that may be affecting how I interpret the world around me.

RICHARD: You're listening to the Reverend Latricia Scriven and Father Tim Holeda on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: I'm Ashley. We have a live event coming up in the next several days that we want to tell you about. On Tuesday, April 30th, Common Ground Committee is cohosting the annual Climate Forward Conference with the University of Southern California Dornsife Center for the Political Future. We'll explore realistic solutions to the challenges of a changing climate.

RICHARD: It's an impressive lineup. The first panel is going to feature a discussion between former members of Congress, Val Demings, a Florida Democrat, and Republican Adam Kinzinger of Illinois. They have different views about navigating the policy tightrope between transitions, sustainability, and equity.

ASHLEY: Our second panel will bring together Gina McCarthy, former EPA chief and White House national climate advisor in the first two years of the Biden administration, with New York Times columnist Bret Stephens. He's a Conservative whose views on climate change evolved after a trip to Greenland in 2022.

RICHARD: This event is free. To find out more, go to our website, commongroundcommittee.org. You can get in-person tickets for the event or register to view it online. Again, it takes place on April 4th between 12:00 and 4:30 Pacific Time. That's 3:00 to 7:30 Eastern. Now more with Father Tim Holeda and the Reverend Latricia Scriven.

ASHLEY: As members of the clergy, you must both, at least sometimes, counsel people who are very different from you. I wonder, what have you learned from those experiences?

REV. DR. LATRICIA: What I've learned is that we share a common humanity. What I've learned is that we exist in a world that is broken in many ways, as well as being life-giving, and that we all have certain things that we need. We need to be loved. We need to feel like we matter. We hurt. We are fearful. We

want somebody to care and to hear, to listen. We want to share life because we are relational beings and that, at our essence, much of who we are and how we experience the world is about seeking love and healing in some form, from somewhere, however we can get it.

RICHARD: That's kind of beautiful. Father Tim, can you top that?

FATHER TIM: I would echo everything that she said. I think the only thing I would say is that what I discover when I'm meeting with somebody who's struggling or needing counseling is that there's a lot more in common with each other than maybe we often think. We're both human, and, as Latricia said, we have these needs that are common to all humans, to all people.

Anne Frank, in the midst of what she was dealing with, hiding from people who wanted to kill her because of her ethnicity and her beliefs, wrote that, "In the end, I think people are good." And I believe that. I feel, even when we act in a so-called evil way or a sinful way, the classical understanding of sin is missing the mark, and that even in our sins, there's an attempt at the good that we fall short of.

RICHARD: Yet, today, and I think especially the COVID pandemic that we're not emerging from after three years, which is a long time, there's a rise in anxiety and fear and polarization among many. Do you both see that?

REV. DR. LATRICIA: Yes.

FATHER TIM: I do. I would go back to -- there was something we said earlier about the need for love and acceptance and all those things. We also have, it seems to me, a need for a narrative about my life and goal, a purpose, meaning. Those are very important, and that leads to isolation. I'm just trying to figure out my life, figure out my purpose and my meaning. So I think that can tend to result in tribalism, result in I'm trying to find something, like a meta-narrative, that will kind of tie together the pieces that are seemingly disintegrated in my life to create some kind of a whole.

Right now, it just seems to be a lot of it's politics that offers to me a cause, something to rally behind, a team that I can be a part of, and that becomes kind of what defines me. And I think it's been exacerbated by the pandemic, but I don't blame the pandemic. I mean, this was going on before. We've just sort of lost a narrative for our country and for our culture.

REV. DR. LATRICIA: I think that we often fall into the trap of experiencing others, experiencing life, experiencing the world from a place of fear and a place of not wanting to be hurt and be vulnerable. And we are both looking for and learning how to love, and the closer we get to this love, this big love idea, the Scripture, in I John, says that, "Perfect love casts out fear." I do think that that love comes from learning ourselves, being open to other people's narratives, a willingness to know that falling and scrapes and hurts are part of what it means to live a full life, and that's okay. And this healing, I think that on our road to discover what it means to be fully healed, we protect ourselves by putting on these labels.

I do believe that, at our core, people want to be better. People -- most people, many people -- want to love, but we feel that we've got to protect ourselves because we're afraid of what might happen to us. So we put on these cloaks that we call labels because they protect us because it's hard to be naked and not ashamed and to be vulnerable and to love ourselves and to be loved and extend that outward. It's hard work, and it's intentional work, and it's the work that is necessary.

ASHLEY: I want to ask you a question, a practical question, about each of you, potentially how you've dealt with differences in your own churches. I'm just going to tell you a quick tale from a church I know, and it's all about COVID. At one point in the pandemic, I can't remember exactly when, a decision was taken or almost taken to let people into church only if they could show proof of vaccination. Through the grapevine, they were let know that if that decision were made, certain very well-established parishioners who had been going there for decades, would not come to church. And it ultimately forced a rethink on that policy.

But I just wonder if you've come up against issues like that in this very divisive time that we've been living through, and how you've dealt with them.

FATHER TIM: Yeah, we could probably do a whole podcast on my experience during the pandemic. It was very fascinating. My church is very -- I mean, it's very diverse. I have a lot of different political opinions that are here, different income levels, lots of education. I'm right across the street from the university. We have a lot of people who are educated, doctors, professors, and so on, but we also have working-class folks and poor people and people who haven't been educated, all kinds of people, different cultures. I feel like, in my congregation, we have people from every continent, essentially, because it's Catholic.

So, in other words, it was quite the challenge. We had people who didn't believe the virus existed, that it was a scam or phony or whatever, to the other extreme, which was it was going to kill us all. I think myself and my predecessor -- I was the assistant here during the time -- we had the best interests of our people in mind. That's what we were trying to focus on, is what's the safest thing for our people? And what we ran against were people who had -- their minds were made up. They had their ideology. They had their way of looking at things.

It was hard to make them budge, and we were all struggling with how to respond to this. To have a hard-nosed approach like, "Everyone's got to wear masks, have vaccinations, and we have to do these things," or the other extreme, which was have no restrictions in place, I think just wasn't prudent. Being a pastor during that was very difficult, trying to, again, just navigate it and try to keep people's eyes fixed on each other and for each other's good and be patient and flexible with one another.

RICHARD: In the church where I worship, it was pretty tense some of the time. Latricia?

REV. DR. LATRICIA: I did experience some of that in a space, not necessarily where I was serving at the time. My question to a group who felt like, "This isn't needed. It's gone too far. We'll be fine," was to say, "Let's say we will be fine. Let's say you feel healthy and confident that you'll be okay. What does it mean to care for other members in our community who may be a little bit more vulnerable? What does it mean to show that we are listening to the concerns of other people?"

It's still difficult, and, I found, pushed people to think outside of themselves or to simply say, "You know what, I'm being selfish. It's all about me." And that's a cool honesty, but owned honesty that says, "I really care more about myself right now than anybody else." When we can push each other to broaden our circle of concern, I think we can come to better decisions. It still does that mean that we will agree. People hold on to things very tightly, but I think it gets us closer to something that we can have in common.

FATHER TIM: Another thing, if I could add, a challenge, and I think this is what's important here -- I'm going to talk about friendship again, and I think Latricia kind of hit on this, too. She brought up thinking about the care of others, but then there's also: at what point are we enabling fear? And then, at what point are people just being selfish and unwilling to give up and sacrifice? There's a line there much like there is between freedom and rights in our nation that is kind of a moving target.

I don't think anyone has the corner on exactly where that line should fall, and I think that line can change. That's, I think, the challenge here, is recognizing that it's not fixed, it's not an ideology, it's not determined by my team or my politics, but, again, it's something that can move, and it can change. I think it's something we need to maybe explore more in our nation and get away from these ideologies to be more fluid in trying to understand one another.

REV. DR. LATRICIA: I don't think we actually want to understand each other. I think we want our way, and I think we don't want to say that we want our way.

RICHARD: But we're still good people.

REV. DR. LATRICIA: But we're still good people. We want to do all the things and still be called good people because we have a need to be seen as good, and we want our way, but it doesn't sound fancy or spiritual to say, "I want my way." So we couch it in behavior and other things. I do think sometimes what we have a problem with is actually telling the truth.

RICHARD: What do both of you think you know about discussions involving difference in seeking common ground through your work, through your life experiences, members of the clergy, that most of the rest of us do not?

REV. DR. LATRICIA: I know that it's hard work. I know that we need to be healed. I know that we want love. I know that we are afraid. I know that we come to the table with lenses that make it really hard to see difference and to be empathetic. I believe that, at our very best, we actually want these things. I believe that, at our worst, we protect ourselves through our silos.

FATHER TIM: I don't know if I could say I know something that maybe the majority of people don't know, I guess we could say. I experience, again, a lot of difference in opinion, beliefs, and so on. I would say, at least what works for me, is to try to really have a healthy suspicion of my own beliefs. That doesn't mean I'm wishy-washy. I became a priest and staked my life on this, imperfectly perhaps, but I'm trying. I'm not afraid of error, I would say, and I'm not afraid of truth. So, to have that, I think that makes me fascinated by others and their beliefs. I think if we could get there instead of seeing each other as enemies or combatants, I think that would be a really good thing.

RICHARD: Thank you very much.

ASHLEY: Yeah, this was a wonderful conversation. Thank you.

And we thought we were done with the interview, but we weren't quite because just before we turned off the recorder, Latricia mentioned she'd just returned from a trip to Israel and Palestine with others from the United Methodist Church. During her time there, she'd realized something.

REV. DR. LATRICIA: We engaged all kinds of people on the ground. We talked to Jewish Israelis, Palestinian Israelis, Palestinians on the West Bank. We talked to ambassadors. We talked to teachers and educators, all kinds of people. And what rang out all the time was this danger of a single story, and because we engage the world, we engage people in snippets, it is so hard to see beyond the narratives that we have created for other people. And often we've not even really engaged our own narratives, and we're living out of our trauma, and that makes things tough.

When you factor in our faith traditions and imagine that we brought together people from religious perspectives, and often the religion seems to be the problem, how do we get at this common ground when sometimes it means for people the need to go beyond the things that we think we believe because they are written, and we've made it live in certain ways that it becomes the problem? There are some it-is-writtens that I had to decide the Spirit transcends the letter. So it's interesting coming together for faith traditions when those often seem to be the things that make us have less common ground rather than more even when we say we share the same faith.

RICHARD: That's a great story. Both Father Tim and Reverend Latricia had a lot to say about love in this interview, and honesty. Real friendships are about both, and they help us see ourselves for who we really are, to remove the logs from our eyes.

ASHLEY: Right, although removing the logs may have been harder for a lot of parishioners than ever before. I really loved the stories they told about how tricky it was to try and get congregants to see things from one another's perspective, especially at the start of the pandemic. And what Latricia said about most of us just wanting our way in the end, I thought that was spot-on.

RICHARD: And one more thing, both Latricia and Father Tim talked about diversity of opinion and diversity of race in their congregations. Clearly, they have a lot of experience about seeing things from others' points of view.

ASHLEY: Before we go, a note about another podcast we think Common Grounders will like.

RICHARD: Reading the news is about a lot more than getting the facts. Our friends at The Christian Science Monitor believe it's their job to report each story with a sense of shared humanity, paying attention to the values that underline our shared human experience.

ASHLEY: In The Monitor's weekly podcast, Why We Wrote This, writers and editors explain how their work informs The Monitor's unique approach. Behind the headlines, they find respect and resilience, dignity and agency, hope, and even joy. It's news that's respectful and constructive.

RICHARD: So listen to Why We Wrote This at [csmonitor.com/commonground](https://www.csmonitor.com/commonground) and hear the stories behind Monitor journalism. It's kind of a master class in news.

ASHLEY: That's it for this time. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: And I'm Richard Davies. Thanks for listening, and thank you to The Village Square and their podcast, Village SquareCast, for making this show possible.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.

