

## Transcript for DFH Episode 08 with guest Michele Cushatt

**Vaneetha:** Well, I am so excited about this conversation with my friend Michele Cushatt today. Michele, we met, actually in person just a few months ago. We were both interviewing for Life Today tv and I got to hear some of your story and it's pretty incredible. So I really can't wait for people to get to hear it and, and just get to know you 'cause it's been a real joy for me. Just, just over the short time.

**Michele:** Likewise.

**Vaneetha:** So before we get started, I would just love it if you could, just let listeners know, just sort of where you live, what you do, what your life is like on a day-to-day basis.

**Michele:** Okay. I live in Colorado. I'm halfway between Denver and Colorado Springs, so. Like seriously halfway between. I can get to downtown Denver or downtown Chicago or Colorado Springs in about the same amount of [00:01:00] time. So we're out in the middle of the country on eight acres. I am an outdoorsy girl, so, I love to be outside, go hiking.

We have a wild life. I am married to Troy. We have six children. We have a blended family. So we have six kids, both of us from prior marriages, as well as three kids that we foster adopted about 12 years ago. So, and their ages all the way from 31 all the way down to twin 16-year-olds. So we have kind of the gamut when it comes to kids day-to-day life looks like.

I'm an executive coach. I'm also a multi-time author. I've got four books that have been published and then I travel and speak internationally. Usually to faith-based audiences, but also at times to corporate or business audience. and really my specialty is similar to yours, Vaneetha, where I really talk about faith and suffering, how we hold onto real faith in the middle of real life.

**Vaneetha:** Wow. Well, I can't wait to hear this story or for listeners to hear it. So [00:02:00] just as we get started, would you mind just briefly sharing, there's so much suffering that you could talk about, but just briefly sharing your story.

**Michele:** Yeah, I, you know, you and I, as you mentioned just met a very short time ago, and I discovered that we have very similar stories, different details, but very similar theme of just crisis after crisis, suffering after suffering. And

that's really been the story of my life for the last 30 years. I'll back up and say that I was raised in a Christian home.

My parents became Christians when I was about, six months old or so, my parents were not raised in a faith-based home. however, when they decided to follow Jesus, everything changed for them. And so as a result, since I was only six months old at the time, I've really never known life without Jesus in it.

Faith has been part of my story from day one, and I'm very, very grateful for that. It's given me a great legacy, heritage of faith, that serves me well every day. Something my parents didn't have that said. As, I [00:03:00] grew up in this environment of faith, I would call it an untried faith because it was very much faith in theory, right?

I would go to church on Sundays and Sunday night and Wednesdays. I would read my Bible, I'd hear all the Bible stories, but it hadn't really intersected or been challenged by the reality of life until, I was 21 years old. I had. married a pastor. So my life had followed this very orderly plan.

I was loving Jesus, going to serve Jesus. I was gonna do full-time ministry, married a pastor. Everything looked like it was going according to plan. And then just a very short time into that marriage, just a few years into that marriage, I watched my husband, my pastor husband, drive away for the last time I had a one-and-a-half-year-old.

I was holding on my hip, you know, like we do as moms. And I watched my husband drive away, for the last time. And just like that, I went from being a pastor's wife, a young pastor's wife, with dreams of ministry for the rest of my life [00:04:00] to being a. in the process of being a divorced single mom, trying to find a career, trying to find a way to support myself and my son, and then really grappling with what do I do with this God that I've prayed to for so long?

And I've prayed for a Christian husband, Christian family, and now I end up with the exact opposite. That was the beginning of my journey of suffering. Just the very beginning, I had no idea that more was yet to come and. In the years following that was, as I said, in my twenties, I'm now 52. Well, in the 30 years since, I have just faced suffering after suffering, including, not just a divorce and, and single motherhood. But then I ended up getting remarried. I met a man at church who was also unexpectedly divorced with two boys. We decided to, you know, wouldn't it be fun to join our families together and do this together? and let me just say that stepfamily doesn't [00:05:00] look like it does on TV at all.

It's not nearly as easy as they portray it. And so that started the journey of blended family, stepfamily, which was its own challenge. and fast forward a little bit, and we were about 10 years into that situation. And by the way, went through all kinds of stuff with my teens, teenage boys, all of that.

I was diagnosed with cancer about 10 years into that marriage. and although the initial diagnosis was cancer caught early, over the years that followed, it would come back two more times. So I ended up having cancer three times. Each time more significant than the time before. My variation of cancer was squamous cell carcinoma of the tongue.

So I had cancer of the tongue, which is, I didn't even know that existed. So if you don't know that that exists, welcome to this club. I had no idea. I was a non-smoker. I was 39 years old, very healthy. and so it just came out of left field. As a result of all three of those diagnoses, by the final time, they [00:06:00] had to remove two thirds of my tongue.

They had to, do an incision. You can see my neck has been cut open many, many times. I had to do, an eight incision on my neck to take out lymph nodes, my submandibular gland, a bunch of other things. My arm was cut open from wrist to elbow again, taking that tissue and vessels to try to rebuild my face and mouth and neck, and then as well as my leg.

And they gave me about four weeks to recover from that nine hour surgery. And then they started doing external radiation and chemotherapy. And without going into all the details, when you start shooting radiation at the face and the neck, it has pretty serious. Consequences, to your body, both inside and out.

And so for those who are watching this, you can see I have all kinds of sc burn scars all over my neck. The scars that you see on the outside are also on the inside, so my vocal cords have been burned significantly. the inside of my mouth and throat, my trachea, esophagus have been burned, which [00:07:00] all that to say, learning how to eat.

Drink, water and swallow and talk have been extraordinarily difficult. It's been eight years since that recent diagnosis, most recent diagnosis, and basically just functioning in my I. I live with permanent disability, which you understand Vaneetha. I live with permanent functional disability and even though at first glance, I may look like I'm perfectly fine and healthy. My body, doesn't operate very well, and so, I feel that every time I sit down to eat dinner with my family or try to take a sip of water or talk on the podcast or whatever, I'm constantly

fighting against the reality of, of what cancer did to me, it just very much devastated my body.

Fast forward through that in the middle of all those cancer diagnoses. My father was diagnosed with terminal pancreatic cancer and died within a very short window of time. He was my, you know, kind of the one [00:08:00] who led me to faith in many ways. And in the middle of all that, we foster adopted three kids with a history of severe abuse neglect.

It's a very long story, but it was a. a family, a relative situation. And so we were kinship providers, and we, because it was a relative, we didn't want them to go to foster care, but it was us or foster care. And so we literally were almost done parenting, and we went back to the beginning and started over with two 4 year olds and a five year old.

And for the last 12 years than we have been raising these additional three children, they're now 16, 16, and 17, and. We can talk more about that, but just the reality of raising kids with a very hard history, has been a whole new different experience of suffering and challenge in my life.

And those are the highlights.

Like we have, as you know, we have the day-to-day things like lost jobs or church conflict or, [00:09:00] you know, all the other stuff that I don't even mention. but it's just really been 30 years that have been riddled by, just unrelenting seasons of suffering and difficulty and wrestling with faith in the middle of all of that.

**Vaneetha:** That's kind of a stunning story. and I've only known you for a few months, but your joy, like you would never guess that all of this has been part of your story, given how others focused you are and how joyful you are.

So that is a witness to me that even in the midst of layers of suffering, because you had this blended family, which I know has issues and then adopted, children in the midst of cancer.

We obviously can't touch on all of 'em, but I would love to just kind of touch on a few. Maybe just starting back with divorce, because that's a very hard thing in the Christian community. And I think from what you said [00:10:00] it was, I'm gonna do the right stuff. I grew up in a Christian home. Life is gonna be good and divorce was a shock to you. I'd love to hear about that. And, and did

you feel hopeless or abandoned by God in the midst of that? And, and if you did, I'd just love to know how did you find hope?

**Michele:** Yeah, I very much felt abandoned by God in that. So being raised in a Christian home and you know, I was raised in the seventies and eighties and part of that culture in the church, you know, as a woman, as a girl, I. You know, the epitome of a dream of a girl was to get married, right? And to have children.

That was kind of the philosophy. It's not quite so much nowadays, but that was a dream. And as a Christian, that means I started praying for my spouse and my one day children when I was in middle school. Like I remember praying that God would bring me, a Christian husband who loved Jesus and wanted to serve Jesus and all of that.

And so that was very, very much something that. I felt like God [00:11:00] and I were in tandem on that like we were. I was praying some good prayers. I mean, how many 15 year old girls are praying for a godly husband to do ministry and all of that. So it seemed very noble and worthy, right? And so when I ended up marrying a pastor, it seemed like he was answering my prayer.

And then very quickly into that marriage, I realized something was off. And without going into details, About the specifics, 'cause some of those details aren't mine to share. There was just, there was some addiction and some other things in that relationship that I had no control over. and no matter how hard I prayed, no matter how hard I worked, no matter how hard I tried to will this marriage into a place of health. I could not make it happen. Now I'm just as flawed as the next person. I have just as many mistakes, but there was a whole dynamic there that I had no control over. and so when I ended up 27, I think I was 27 or so, single mom, divorced, former [00:12:00] pastor's wife.

And remember this was in the nineties. When, divorce was like the worst thing you could do in the church. I was raised in a pretty conservative Christian Church and some of our current issues weren't even topics on the table at the time. So the worst thing that you could really do at that point was to end up divorced.

That's what it felt like to me. And so what am I to do was a 27 year old who had only wanted to do full-time ministry, like pretty much her whole life. What do you do when now you're marked with this. This Scarlet D, right? That you are divorced. And on top of that, I had this anger toward God. I felt really bitter and resentful because in my mind I had done my part.

I had been a good girl. I had gone to youth group. I had gone on mission trips. I had gone to Christian college. I was gonna serve Jesus. So I did. Checked all the religion boxes. I had done all the right things, and yet God wasn't holding up his end of the bargain. Now, here I [00:13:00] am at my age. I realize the arrogance and entitlement in that, but I'm just telling you the truth.

I felt like God had not done his part. I had done my part. He wasn't doing his part. And that made me so angry because I felt like, God had betrayed me. He had betrayed my trust. I was trying so hard to be good, and he was not giving me the reward for my good behavior, right? And that made me to the point where I really didn't wanna have much to do with God at all for a good solid year because I felt so betrayed by him.

**Vaneetha:** Oh, that I so relate to that. I think, you know, just feeling like you do all the right stuff and then somehow God is not coming through. And I'm guessing there's a lot of people listening that have felt that way, either in their marriage or something else. Like we are praying the right prayers. Why did you not answer them?

So, so how did you find hope again after feeling like [00:14:00] God had let you down?

**Michele:** Yeah, well at some point, you know, I said I spent about a year where I really didn't want to have much to do with him 'cause I felt like God had failed me. I remember, reading, I think it's in, I can't remember if it's in first or second Timothy or elsewhere in scripture, but it says that if, that if we are faithless, he is faithful still because he cannot, disown himself.

He cannot be contrary to His nature. And I, I just was like, What do you mean he's faithful still? He hasn't been faithful to me, like he's let me down. He hasn't done what he needed to do. I also remember reading the verse that talks about, and hope does not disappoint us and out loud, I mean, I just remember screaming, yes it does.

Hope does disappoint us. It does let us down. And so, you know, part of my journey, was kind of stating those hard to say. feelings out loud, like giving voice to them, which you know, I know you guys, some of [00:15:00] you are going, is lightning gonna strike? I'm gonna back up 'cause Lightning's going to strike any moment.

Right? And God didn't send down lightning to strike me. I mean, his grace is new every morning, right? but part of my journey to get to hope is I had to walk

out the reality of how hard I was wrestling with that. It came a point in time after a year of pretty much not wanting to have to do anything with God.

I remember finding myself in bed one early, early morning and, and I was pretty much rejecting anything to do with him. And I realized that the suffering didn't go away just because I rejected God. In other words, I could either have suffering with God or endure suffering without God. But enduring suffering without God was completely devoid of any hope. So even though I felt like hope had disappointed me, and God had disappointed me, at least as I wrestled through that with him, I wasn't [00:16:00] alone. If I chose to wrestle through suffering and hopelessness without God, there was nothing like we're talking. That is the definition of despair. And so I remembered that day and very simply 27 years old young woman, and I finally said, I don't need to understand.

I just need you. That was a moment where I relinquished control, like at some level I had to relinquish my need to understand and instead just hold onto him. In hindsight, now, I would say what I was doing was, for so many years, for my 27 years up. At that point, my hope was in an outcome. It was in an outcome at that point in time when I said, I don't need to understand.

I just need you. I decided to put my hope in a person, not the outcome, and that was a very real shift when I started [00:17:00] to find hope

again.

**Vaneetha:** Oh, what a great word that you surrendered and said, I don't need to understand. I just need you. And, and that so resonates with me and I think so many people, because we wanna understand and we have to let that go because we're not ever gonna fully understand. We may see parts of the way God has used our suffering, but we're just not gonna understand it fully.

Thank you for that. Putting hope in an outcome is I think what we all start with and then see that our hope can't be in that.

**Michele:** That's so hard, and I just wanna say for people who are listening right now, that shift from hoping in an outcome to hoping that a person doesn't happen overnight, that's a hard journey of learning that God, who he is, his nature, his affection, his love can be enough for you.

It can, but it, it takes some time to let go of that outcome. So don't be hard on yourself. It's if you're not quite there yet.

**Vaneetha:** Right, right. [00:18:00] I would completely say amen to that. It, it is a process.

**Michele:** Mm-hmm.

**Vaneetha:** I think it starts by sort of crying out to God the way you did. I don't, I don't need to understand, or maybe I want to understand. Help me to meet you in the midst of this. You know, we just come to Jesus as we are.

we don't have to come up with words that sound super great. It's just sort of drawing near to God in wherever we are.

**Michele:** wherever we are. Exactly. So wise,

yes.

**Vaneetha:** Yeah. So, I'd love to hear a little bit more about, just sort of this shame and what you, what advice maybe you would give to, to women right now who are listening who feel a lot of shame in their churches. 'cause even though in the nineties there was, maybe less shame than there was. There is now, but I think a lot of women do feel like, Hey, wow, I don't know if I belong in church.

People are wondering, you know, whose fault was this? Why did you get divorced? Was this biblical? I felt that myself. Lots of questions [00:19:00] that I didn't feel free to answer really in detail and, and yet not sure what to do with this feeling that I was less than.

**Michele:** Yeah. What I discovered after being divorced is that, the preponderance of energy was spent on trying to determine if I was justified in being divorced, like who was right and who was wrong, and very little energy was spent in just taking care of the divorcee. Right, and so that's interesting to me. I find that interesting to me at this stage of my life that as a church we're spending more time arguing about who's right and who's wrong.

Versus caring for the poor and the needy, and the widow and the orphan, and the broken and the sick and the loss. Right. and, and I, and I'm not saying that there isn't good value in solid theology and knowing righteousness and pursuing righteousness, but in the nineties, going through a [00:20:00] divorce, most conversations were asked, well, You know what happened and who was right and wrong, and they would ask it in their own way.



They weren't always that bold, but they wanted to know who had the affair or who had the biblical reason to do this, and what does this mean about you now? And, and does this mean that God has absolved you of this and all that kinda stuff? And there was so much energy around that. And I was just a 27 year old with a one and a half year old trying to survive single motherhood.

We had moved to a new state, so I had no family. I had nobody close by, nobody within a thousand miles. And so I was on my own very much so. And so that. Created when, when so much energy is spent trying to determine, my level of, of sinfulness or, or acceptability before God, that by nature piles on shame.

It tells me that [00:21:00] I'm only as valuable as my most recent failure. Right. I'm only as worthy and lovable as my most recent mistake or, or failure or mishap or shame or whatever. And what that does is it constantly puts me on a track to need to perform in order to belong. Right?

And this is so unfortunate because that's not the gospel at all.

I mean, the whole gospel message is while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Period. Right. That performance shouldn't even come into the equation because we were completely unable to perform and God sent Jesus in order to be our rescue and the payment of our, our sin and our debt and the bridge to connect us with God.

And yet, This dialogue around the righteousness of our behavior and whether or not we were justified in being divorced or [00:22:00] not, or blah, blah, blah, whatever, put me in this mode that if I don't perform, if I don't prove that I'm worthy, then I don't have a place here. And I translated that to then God thinks I don't have a place either.

And this started this ongoing pattern, which had kind of. Come from childhood, but then into adulthood of constantly feeling like I need to be a performative Christian. That that did a lot of works of service and earned my salvation and proved that I was worthy and constantly was doing good stuff so I can be right with God.

And that's, by the way, for those of you who are caught up in that, that is a recipe for exhaustion, despair, and disillusionment with faith.

**Vaneetha:** What a beautiful point there. Just, that we feel like in the Christian community, recent sins, they, they all of a sudden become the biggest thing that

defines us and, and we need to be a people of grace. [00:23:00] And what a great reminder.

**Michele:** You know, the other thing to fall out from that down the road, and I want people to kind of understand this, this is so important, is in, for example, when I got cancer, Then it's not hard to make the leap that you must have cancer because you've done some wrong things. Right? When you live in a performative faith, a performative Christianity, where you felt like you have to earn belonging, then when things go wrong, then the only way to make that math equation work is that somehow you must have done something wrong to deserve it. Right. And let me tell you, I have no shortage of people who have come to me over the years and tried to figure out what it was that I did to cause my own cancer.

Right.

**Vaneetha:** Wow, that's pretty scary. But I, understand that

'cause we wanna make sense of the world and we wanna make sure it's not gonna happen to us. So if we can put somebody else's suffering on [00:24:00] them because they did something wrong, then sort of like Job's, friends, it protects us, you know, in this crazy way. that adds so much burden though, to people and, and. So thank you for sharing that.

So with, along with, you know, remarriage, which was a wonderful thing, there comes a blended family, which it can be a wonderful thing, but I would love to just talk, hear from you about just the unique challenges that came with the blended family and what was surprising.

**Michele:** Well, probably, I mean, there was a lot that was surprising. I mean, what's most surprising about the blended family is you get married. My husband and I went away for one night together, and then we came home and literally sat down at the kitchen table and started doing homework with our four, seven, and nine year old.

So when you have a blended family, there is no time to get familiar with each other or to get to know each other as husband and wife. You were right in the thick of parenting and for us it was three boys, two in, [00:25:00] in grade school, one in preschool, kindergarten, and I mean, We went right into parenting dynamics without even establishing our marriage rhythms, our couple dynamics.

And that is not easy. And then on top of that, you have kind of the ruins of prior marriages that are constantly, mucking up current realities. So you have the extended family, you have the. Former in-laws who have the exes, who have, parenting schedules. we had one parenting schedule with two kids.

We had a different parenting schedule with the other child, and so there was no real normal in our house. Every week was kind of different depending on who was going where. And holidays. Let's just not even talk about holidays because we just, it was a big hot mess. There was no stability. And then on top of that, you layer on top of that the fact that all five of us, Troy and I, as well as [00:26:00] our three kids, we're still grieving the loss of our initial families, right?

And so you take five grieving people. Who are grieving in wildly different ways, and you put them in the house together and you're trying to sit there and say, now everybody get along now. Okay. It just doesn't work. so it was just, I think the intensity of conflict of, of the, you know, everybody trying to find their own way and how we would.

You know, at some level we're all trying to mark our territory, if you can see it that way, you know, we're all trying to find our place and so it just creates tension and conflict all the time. in addition to that, and this is what I personally struggled with, I had such a dream of traditional family, like I wanted a traditional family unit.

Making memories, taking pictures, having the family album, the family picture on the fireplace, you know, [00:27:00] all of that. And so in my second family, since my first family didn't turn out like that, I tried to make my second family fit the traditional family mold, right. And you cannot take a blended family and force it to be a traditional family.

It doesn't work. And the more I tried to arm wrestle my new family into a traditional family mold to make everybody behave like my dream in my head, the more miserable everybody became, I became more controlling. Everybody else became more rebelling against it. I mean, there was just. I was disappointed.

They were disappointed. Everybody felt disillusioned with this, blended family. And so at some level, and this was my biggest lesson in blended family, I mean, I really think this was it. This is where the healing started, is when I threw away basically the traditional family blueprints and realized God was gonna have to build something completely new. [00:28:00] So take those blueprints for the

traditional family and you just basically have to burn them and grieve that dream, and then dream something different with a blend of family.

**Vaneetha:** Yes, dream something different. And I think that's such a good word for people. I've talked to a lot of people in blended families who, who are really grieving the. The fact that their family doesn't look the way they want it to look, and, blended families start with trauma.

So that, just understanding that whereas a traditional family doesn't begin with trauma necessarily. There may be trauma, but I don't think I, I really thought about that myself either that there's trauma all over.

**Michele:** I've done some work with blended family ministry. Family Life has a great blended and blessed conference, and there's a lot of step family ministry through family life and it's so, it's so critical. One thing I've [00:29:00] learned about Stepfamilies blended families, it's really hard for them to actually connect at church because they carry so much shame and they're trying to hide.

All the chaos that's happening at home. So they're, you know, blended step families are often the ones sitting in the back of church. They're often the ones that only come nominally because it's too hard to feel exposed. They feel like they're surrounded by all these perfect families and they're not. I think that's changed somewhat over the years from when I was doing it back in the nineties and early two thousands.

But there's a sense of. You know, they need resources, but it's so hard to admit, I need help. We're not doing very well. You know, if you've already failed at one marriage, why would you want to admit that you're failing at a second? Marriage and family, right? And so, So even blended family, step family ministries have a hard time, connecting to these families because they are so resistant or, or afraid to [00:30:00] admit that they need help.

There's so much shame around that. So anything we can do to help lower the shame and make them feel loved. And by the way, if you're in a step-family, blended family. Oh my friends, you are so loved. There is a place for you. You know, Jesus even said that he came for the sick, not the healthy. Well, you have to be sick in order for you to need help, right?

And so admitting that, is exactly the next right step. And once you can get resource, you can start to discover that a lot of what your experience, as hard as it is, as ugly as it may be. It's also somewhat normal for a blended family, step family situation, and there are people who can help you through it.

**Vaneetha:** And that reminds me a little bit, of sort of your adoption story too, in that the church sort of has this idealized view, like you adopt a child and it's just all perfect and you know, it's a picture of Christ adopting us and, and it's just gonna be beautiful, but it's, It's hard.

[00:31:00] And, and just I'd love to just hear, what led you to the decision of adoption?

**Michele:** We, so we were almost done parenting our boys and you know, as I've now talked about blend of family, we had our three boys. You know, that those years of raising them in a blend of step family, we're not easy. So we're almost to the end, we're like almost to empty nesters at this point. And my husband and I are like, "Hallelujah!

We're almost done." Like finally. The kids will be grown. They're gonna leave the nest and we can finally have a marriage. Remember we came home from our wedding to parenting and doing homework with our boys. So this was kind of like the end of our marathon. We can finally have our honeymoon period after raising our kids, right?

And in the middle of that, I mean it was two months after our second son graduated from high school. So we are on the cusp. Our third son was starting to drive. We were right there. It was two months after he graduated from high school. My, our second son that we got the phone call from a relative saying, you know that [00:32:00] there are these twin four year olds and a five-year-old.

the twins are a boy and a girl, and the five-year-old's a girl. Will you take them? It's either you or foster care. This was after my first diagnosis of cancer. Again, we were on the verge of empty nest, so logic would tell me that the last thing we needed at that point was to start parenting over again, especially now that I had had a diagnosis of cancer, right?

This is the last thing we needed to do, but again, at this point we thought, It was cancer caught early. Doctors had said, you have nothing to worry about. And we also started to feel like we have now gone through some significant trauma ourselves between step family, blended family, divorce, remarriage, as well as cancer, right?

And so we thought here we have three kids that have gone through trauma hardship every day. They wake up afraid. Well, I knew something about waking up, afraid. Every day after having cancer and facing my [00:33:00] mortality.

What if all of these experiences have actually helped prepare us to be parents to these three kiddos?

what if, you know, I had always wanted to do ministry full-time. What if God wasn't asking me to go and do ministry? He was asking me to stay in, do ministry as a mom to these three kiddos with trauma. And so it was about 24 hours after that phone call that my husband and I. Drove to another state and we picked up these three kiddos in a Walmart parking lot.

We had to borrow car seats because we hadn't had car seats in years. I mean, I didn't know. I'm like, I didn't even knew, know the newest technology in car seats. It had been so long. So we had to borrow car seats, put them in our car, drive to another state, pick up these kiddos and bring them home. And and literally we started parenting all over again.

What? First of all, let me just make it really clear. We love our kiddos. I mean, I'm so glad that they became part of our family and they [00:34:00] have challenged and grown my faith in ways that nothing else could, and I love them and we're glad that they're part of the family. That said, It has. Out of all the things I've dealt with, it's probably been the hardest thing that we've ever done.

and I, I say this very point blank because as a church, as you've talked about, we've done so much to talk about, over the last 10, 15 years about the importance of adoption and the importance of the widow and the orphan and that the church should be the center of, of basically, Resolving the foster care issue, right?

That we should be the ones taking in the orphans and giving them homes and all that. And that's wonderful. and that's true. But we've also tended to glamorize adoption. And what we need to do is realize that, we don't foster adopt because it's glamorous and it's noble. We foster and adopt because it's right.

And this is [00:35:00] critical because it's actually very, very hard. And when it gets hard, We keep going out of obedience, not a sense of of nobleness. This is not what my husband and I have done is not noble. Trust me. There have been many days that I've been in the fetal position in the corner. We do it because God adopted us. We do it because God took us. Wrecked with trauma and abuses and losses and orphaned and everything else. And God says, I'm gonna adopt them and make them part of our family. And we have fought him on it and we have rebelled and we have been difficult children over and over again. And God still says every day I choose you.

I choose you. You are mine. You are precious, Isaiah 43. You are precious and honored in my sights and I love you. And so he modeled adoption for us and this is why we walk out fostering [00:36:00] adoption with our kiddos. But it's not easy and it's ugly and it's hard and it's challenging and it rips me apart some days.

And we do it anyway out of obedience, not because we're righteous or noble.

Vaneetha: Mm. So what would you say to somebody who's sort of in either considering adoption and is kind of afraid? Like I've heard horror stories about things being really, really hard. Like, should we do it? We're we're just grappling, you know, if somebody says, we're grappling with this right now, what would you say to them?

Michele: Yeah. well, it is really hard. I'm not gonna lie to you and say that it's a, just a walk in the park and everything's fine. Some of those horror stories are real. They are true. They are. It is that hard. at the same time, it's also really good. Like there's, there nothing has taught me more about the, the horror of the gospel.

I mean, do, do we really wrestle with [00:37:00] the extreme measures that God went through to adopt us? I mean, it is a violent process that Jesus went through in order to reconcile us to God. It was violence. Let's not, let's not minimize that. Nothing has helped me understand God's tenacity and. I'm Relenting compassion and determination to reconcile us to himself, like my own journey of foster adopting.

So yes, is it difficult? Absolutely is have I learned more about God himself? Have I, has my faith been strengthened? Has it been tested at times, but have I come to understand? What I've been given through Christ more than ever before. Absolutely. And that makes it so very good. it's holding those both in tandem.

Whether or not you should do it, you will have to walk through that journey yourself to determine that it isn't for everybody. But there's [00:38:00] a lot of ways for us to care for the orphan and the widow and those in foster care and those that need adopting than just taking kids yourself. I would suggest one.

If you can't foster adopt, then support a family. That is be willing to babysit, be willing to bring resources, being willing to do some research, you know, whatever. but support a family that is. if it's something you really want to do,

then make sure you are resourced. You have to determine that you will not do it alone.

You cannot do this by yourself. You need to resource yourself with plenty of resources around you. there's lots of great resources that focus on the family. They have a whole adoption foster ministry there with tons of resources. Go to focus on the family. You can connect with them and get those resources for free, but make sure that you're not doing alone and go into it with eyes wide open.

Don't go into it with a dream of [00:39:00] happily ever after. Go with it with your eyes open to - you will be walking out the gospel narrative with these kiddos.

**Vaneetha:** Mm. So for people listening who are wondering how they can help a family, do you have any specific things that if they say, “ You know, we have a friend who's adopted and they're, they're really struggling with their kids, how, how can they come come alongside them?”

**Michele:** Allow them to process and vent without being horrified. Sometimes they just need a safe place to talk about what's really happening at home without you freaking out and being horrified and shutting down. So be that safe place that allows them to share. another thing that you can do, very practical.

Be willing to do the legwork on some of the research, like for me. Our ongoing challenge is finding trauma-informed therapists and counselors, and I'm constantly scanning websites and figuring out insurance, and making phone calls and doing legwork. Do some legwork for somebody. [00:40:00] If you're in a place where you have some trauma awareness, offer respite care offer, like I said, to babysit for a night so the couple can go out to dinner.

Do it with two or three other people, so you're not alone. Offer to do a weekend so they can, the parents can get away. One thing that people don't understand is, even though my kids are older, we can't always go and leave our kids. We can't leave our kids alone all the the time. and we have to be very thoughtful about that.

And so there were years where we didn't get a single date the entire year. Okay. And you have a married couple trying to have a healthy marriage and they don't have time alone ever. Right? So come up with ways to do that, even if you do it, let's say at the church building where you have a adoption babysitting night for



people who have trauma adopted kids, where you offer babysitting in a safe environment in the gymnasium at church, so parents can go out.

There's lots [00:41:00] of creative ways that you can do that. of course, Resourcing therapy is very expensive. If you have financial resources, you could certainly help in that way. or simply just ask, what do you guys need most right now? And they will likely tell you.

**Vaneetha:** Wow. We have good friends who have, adopted, a little boy who is really struggling. And I know they would love for people to hear that because they said people were there at the beginning like, Hey, we wanna be there for you. This is a great thing. And then over the years people just sort of trickled away 'cause it seemed like too much.

**Michele:** It either seems like too much and sometimes it is. Like I've had people, like, they just can't tolerate what happens in our home. they can't tolerate hearing about it or whatever. But then there's the other piece. They just assume everything's normal. Everything's fine. Well, they've been with you for 12 years, so everything's fine.

It doesn't work that way. and in fact, when you hit the teen years, it can actually get worse than it's ever been before. And so, Having some awareness of the fact that what they're doing day in [00:42:00] and day out is not easy. Oh my goodness. You could simply say, I want you to know I see what you're doing, and even though you've been doing it for five years or 10 years, I know it's still hard some days.

I see you. I see you. I wanna validate what you're doing. It's not easy, and I'm with you.

**Vaneetha:** Mm. I know there's lots of people that are benefiting from that, so thank you for that. So sort of kind of backing up a little bit, just kind of looking at your life and the times you've wrestled with God through all of these different things, what would you say to someone who's sort of in a season right now of wrestling with truths about God?

You know, why is he letting all of these things happen, you know, over and over again? and they're starting to just question God.

What would you say to them?

**Michele:** well first, the fact that you're questioning means that you take your faith seriously and you're thinking and processing. That's not a bad thing. Right. I would rather take somebody who's willing to [00:43:00] wrestle than someone who is so compliant and indifferent that they don't even bother to think about it.

Right? so the fact that you're wrestling is not a bad thing. it feels bad. It feels uncomfortable, but the fact that you're wrestling means that your faith matters to you. And that's wonderful. That's a, that's a good thing. That's a great place to start. two. Okay. Wrestling with your faith or questioning or whatever, is a normal part of developing a deeper faith.

So I want to reframe it. We think that that wrestling means something's wrong. Wrestling does not mean something's wrong. Wrestling at times is the precipice from which you actually dive. Your faith grows deeper. So I want you to think when you plant a seed or you drop a seed on the ground, the seed actually has to exert a lot of energy to dig deeper, to have their roots dig down and dig deeper.

There's a ton of energy [00:44:00] spent, the seed wrestling with the soil. To get its roots to go down deeper. It's the wrestling that causes the roots to actually go deeper and deeper and deeper. This last week, there was a tornado in my hometown of Highlands Ranch. We lived there for years. We don't live there anymore, but we lived there for years.

It's about a half an hour from us now. This tornado went through our town in Highlands Ranch, Colorado, and trees were downed everywhere, and I was amazed to see trees that were, you know, 30, 40 feet high that were completely, grounded, like they were ripped up and landed. Part of the reason so many trees, the trees that were knocked over was because some of them were evergreens that have a notoriously shallow root system in our airy climate.

So you would see these massive trees with very shallow root system. Right. What I would say is the kind of faith that can't weather a storm is a faith that [00:45:00] never wrestles. Okay? So the root system stays very, very shallow, and so all it takes is a good solid wind for it to be, even if it's a 40 year old faith, for it to be uprooted.

So when you're wrestling, I want you to start to see your wrestling as, oh, I'm about ready to grow. God is about ready to take my faith deeper because that's exactly what's going to happen. And then my final piece of kind of advice here, or kind of counsel and remember first is that, wrestling is a sign that you care about your faith.

That's not a bad thing. Two, wrestling is actually a means to a deeper faith . The final counsel I would give you is, wrestling should always be productive. And what I mean by don't allow yourself to be caught up. There's, there's some people who like to say they're doubting their faith and they create kind of, it's kind of a fad right [00:46:00] now to say, well, I'm, I'm, you know, I'm questioning everything.

Right. that's fine, but. Wrestling should always move us forward. It should always move us, and it should be productive when we get too comfortable in doubting. We're not, we're no longer seeking, answers or we're no longer seeking truth. Always let your doubt push you forward as you seek truth. I I like to use the metaphor of if you're lost in the woods.

you're not gonna just plop down on the ground and go, well, I'm lost. I'm just gonna sit here and be lost. 'cause it's so cool being lost. Right? It's so hip being lost. No. If you're lost in the woods, you're gonna start to use all your resources to find your way through the woods. You're gonna look at your.

Your gps, you're gonna make a phone call. If you have a phone, if you have a map, you're gonna use your map. You're gonna look at the [00:47:00] signs, you're gonna watch the sun to see where east, west, north, south is. When you're lost in the woods, your goal is to get home. So you're gonna use every resource at your disposal to move through your lostness and get to home.

I want you to do the same. If you're wrestling, that's fine. That's part of a deeper faith. It's a sign that your faith matters to you. Now's the time to pull out every resource, to pull out all the stops to find your way back to truth.

**Vaneetha:** Hm, I love that because, Wrestling means, you know, when you actually physically wrestle with someone, you have to touch them. You engage with them.

And so when we wrestle with God, we need to be engaging with God, not with other people about God necessarily, but wrestling with God. And that will lead us to a deeper faith as we see with Jacob and, you know so many people, but you are right.

If we don't wanna be [00:48:00] found and we sort of disengage in our wrestling, turns to wrestling with the world and wrestling with other things, then we're not really looking to be found by God.

**Michele:** That's such a great point Vaneetha because with that whole metaphor of being lost in the woods, let's say you have a guide next to you who has walked those woods his whole entire life, so he knows them in and out. Not engaging with God is like not asking the guide how to get out.

Right. So you have the one who has created all things that knows all things, who's omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, all of that.

So why would you not turn to the one who sees all knows all the Alpha Omega beginning end and say, God, I'm lost. You're not. Help me to find my way through.

**Vaneetha:** Yes. So people listening. If, if you are in a season of wrestling wrestle with God, like ask God, as we talked about earlier, I would say just even, you know, God, I don't understand, or I wanna [00:49:00] understand. Just continue this dialogue with God and he will be there.

**Michele:** Yes, He will.

**Vaneetha:** Well, Michele, I'd love to hear just a little bit about your new book: A Faith That Will Not Fail.

**Michele:** Absolutely, I have it right here. So for people who are, it's called a faith that will not fail. 10 practices to build up your faith when your world is falling apart. And very simply, it goes through the practices that I use to help me stay grounded through these many, many years of unrelenting suffering, and they're not the practices you would think of, they're somewhat unconventional.

I, when I was going through so many difficult things, I kept thinking, I just need to read my Bible more and pray more. And yes, reading your Bible and praying is important, but I was also exhausted. I was at the end of my rope. I was losing hope. I was having a hard time seeing my way through so much loss.

And so these practices are things like the practice of [00:50:00] lament, allowing yourself to grieve. What does that look like to allow yourself to grieve or the practice of perspective like intentionally? Kind of turning and shifting your view at times or the practice of relinquishment, we talked about letting go the practice of relinquishment or the practice of waiting.

What does it look like to wait? Well, when things, when answers aren't coming as quickly as we want them to. And so these practices, and you know, I divided

the book into the 10 practices. Five chapters per practice, which means the chapters are very, very tiny and they're meant to be like a daily life preserver.

So if you feel like you're drowning and you don't have the strength to do a three hour Bible study, this will give you a five minute life preserver in scripture. Good. Solid theology that's accessible to the person that's in the trenches right now.

**Vaneetha:** And that's what we need when we're in the trenches. Often it's hard to open the Bible, so we need [00:51:00] things that help lead us to that.

And that sounds like that would be a great, great thing to read if you feel like, wow, I feel desperate and it's just really hard to find God.

**Michele:** Thank you.

**Vaneetha:** Well, just a couple more questions. sort of totally different, but I think maintaining a sense of humor in the midst of struggle is really important. It, it was for me. Would just love to know if it's something important to you, and if so, what makes you laugh?

**Michele:** Yeah, so people who know me really well, my closest friends know that I am a person of humor. I laugh all the time. I love to laugh. And it's funny because I write about really serious topics, but in most of my books, you'll find my humor throughout because I don't think we can talk about hard topics without having a good sense of humor.

So, so I use that all the time. I had a friend come up to me or a reader, a person who knew me online. That got to know me on the weekend retreat one time at the end of the weekend. She goes, I had no idea you'd be funny. And I'm like, I'm like, well, I thank [00:52:00] you. That's a compliment, I think. Thank you very much.

But it's so critical. I mean, to find ways to laugh and to have fun and to lighten things up. And so, I mean, I find all kinds of things funny. During my second diagnosis, my closest friends did a humor campaign and every week for my entire treatment and recovery, it was about 10, 12 weeks. A different person would send me something hilarious in the mail.

For example, I had friends that started sending me Rolling Stones t-shirts because it has a tongue on it. And since I had tongue cancer, Stones t-shirts

became my favorite T-shirts that I would wear all the time, and I would just, I wouldn't explain it. People would look at my shirt and say, are you a Rolling Stones fan?

I'm like, not particularly, but I'm just, let it sink in for a minute. You'll connect.

**Vaneetha:** Oh, my word!~ . That's funny. I love that humor campaign idea. What a gift to people who are suffering because I think [00:53:00] laughter it, it just does something to us though. So what a great idea for people here who have friends who are suffering or are suffering themselves. Like say, I want a humor campaign, 'cause that's something people would love to get behind.

**Michele:** I got the craziest stuff in the mail. I mean, it was, hilarious. And I just love people's creativity. you know, everybody took a different week and their creativity was fantastic. It was just, I got records. One person had recorded a record back in the fifties or sixties. They sent me a, an original copy of it and it was so ridiculous.

It was so hilarious. I still have it, you know, the Rolling Stones, t-shirt, all kinds of different stuff, and it was a great way. Again, I talked about the practice of perspective to shift my eyes from. Seeing only my pain to also seeing the presence of laughter and humor and friendship in the middle of a hard season.

**Vaneetha:** Wow. Yes. Oh, that's good. Well, my last question to you is something I ask, the end [00:54:00] of every podcast. the podcast is called Desperate for Hope, and I just like to ask people, what is one practical way you found hope when you felt most desperate for it?

**Michele:** Hmm. there are so many, different things that I did very intentionally 'cause I knew I wouldn't, I, you know, I think going back to bring it full circle, going back to my initial story of the divorce, when I had so lost hope, that season actually prepared me for almost losing my life when I, you know, face, the temptation of hopelessness again.

So one thing I did was I got a blank journal. just a big fat blank journal. And, I, during this extended season, every day, I would take a whole page. I had a whole stack of markers, and I would tell myself at the beginning of the day, I want you to look for any evidence of God's presence with you today.

And I would mark the date at the top of a single page. And anytime something happened, somebody said something, a verse [00:55:00] popped up, something happened that made me aware of God's reality. I wrote it down on that page and

I still have up behind me. I have a, a box up on the top of that shelf, that's called, I call it my altar stone box.

It's in my box of remembrance, but that notebook is in there. And I have months of days where I captured, evidences of God's presence with me during that really hard season when I almost died. That gave me hope. Some days were almost empty . I'll just tell you, some days were almost blank, but I had other days that were so packed full that there was no blank space on the page, and that gave me hope.

On the hard days, I could go back and look at the pages where I saw God present the day before. So even on that day, if I felt like I couldn't see him, I had other days I could refer back to, to remind me that God was with me. And that gave me hope, when I was desperate for it.

**Vaneetha:** Mm. Evidence of God's presence. I [00:56:00] love that. Well, thank you so much for joining me. Well, this has been such a great conversation for me, so, so appreciate your time and just your story. Thank you for stewarding your suffering.

**Michele:** Thank you, Vaneetha. It's been such a pleasure to be here with you. Thanks for inviting me.