

Introduction ([00:00](#)):

Yale Podcast Network. Welcome to the podcast, a Yale Divinity School podcast series focusing on issues related to religion, culture, and politics. In this episode, YDS alum, Emily Judd interviews Jonathan Wilson, Hartgrove YDS, lecturer and assistant director of the Center for Public Theology and Public Policy at YDS, Jonathan reflects on how a peacemaking trip to Iraq during the US invasion transformed his life,

Wilson-Hartgrove ([00:31](#)):

The people who were supposed to be our enemies, stopping and taking care of our friends.

Introduction ([00:37](#)):

He shares insights from his latest book, white Poverty with Bishop William Barber and how they apply to the upcoming presidential election.

Wilson-Hartgrove ([00:45](#)):

Talking to this swing vote is the key to winning because this is the largest group of people who are not going to show up unless somebody talks to them. I mean, bless his heart, JD knew some people in Appalachia, he ain't quite from there, and he's largely made a career off of selling people from Appalachia out.

Introduction ([01:04](#)):

And he also shares how the Yale Center for Public Theology and Public Policy will give students the tools to make a genuine difference in the world.

Wilson-Hartgrove ([01:12](#)):

What we're trying to do at a Center for Public Theology and Public Policy is to give people a framework to understand where your faith connects with issues that matter to you.

Judd ([01:27](#)):

Last year marked 20 years since the start of the US invasion in Iraq, something that you witnessed and you wrote about in your book titled to Baghdad and Beyond How I Got Born Again in Babylon, which documents this transformative trip you took to Iraq in your early twenties as part of a peacemaking team in the lead up to the US invasion. How did being in Iraq during that time change you?

Wilson-Hartgrove ([01:53](#)):

Yeah, that was a couple of decades ago now, but still very present to me in terms of my faith at that moment. George Bush was president and was using very Christian and evangelical Christian language to talk about the So-called War on Terror, and I was trying to learn a way to be faithful to Jesus in the midst of that and went with a group called the Christian Peacemaker Teams. And it was a powerful experience because both for Leah, my wife and myself, it brought us into a very intense relationship. As bombs were falling and we were preying with many people there on the ground for our lives, it brought us into this very intense relationship with people who had been practicing a way of peacemaking, many of them for six, seven decades. And those elders, I think, inspired us with their practice of a way of peacemaking that they had learned, many of them in the Civil Rights movement and from Gandhian kind of teachers in the 20th century.

([03:15](#)):

So I think more than anything, as a Christian praying under those bombs and learning to trust the way of nonviolence that Jesus taught helped me to recognize the centrality of the resurrection to the Christian story. Because when you know that trying to be faithful to what Jesus has called you to could end your life, it's a moment when you can realize why the promise of resurrection is real power. And it has been a gift for me to be able to live in this way the rest of my life with a very palpable sense of the resurrection's power.

Judd ([04:06](#)):

When you returned from Iraq back home to North Carolina, you founded the Rupa House, a center of hospitality named after a town in Iraq where you actually experienced this moment of radical hospitality. What's the story behind the name?

Wilson-Hartgrove ([04:23](#)):

We were in Iraq when bombs were falling, and so on a road in the Western Nbar province, we were in a caravan and one of our cars hit a piece of shrapnel in the road and it blew the tire. The car careened into a ditch. Everyone in the car was seriously injured, and they stumbled out bleeding on the side of the road and the cars we were in had continued, didn't immediately recognize that they weren't there anymore. So a car of Iraqis actually stopped and took them into their car, drove them into this town called Rupa, and there the doctor said to them three days ago, your country bombed our hospital, but we'll take care of you. And he sewed up their heads and bandaged their wounds. And when we got back, I remember thanking him and asking him what we owed him for his services, and he cleared his throat very with disgust. He said, you Americans, you always think about money. He said, all I want from you is for you to go back and tell people what's really happening here. And so we did come back to the United States that was in 2003 and told that story of the people who were supposed to be our enemies stopping and taking care of our friends.

Judd ([05:47](#)):

And it reminds me of the story of the Samaritan. You know,

Wilson-Hartgrove ([05:50](#)):

Me too as a kid raised on the Bible. It immediately reminded me of that story, and we told it to churches as such, and at the end of that story, Jesus says, go and do likewise in Luke's gospel. So we felt like having lived the story, Jesus was speaking to us and we came to start Rupa house in Durham that summer because it was the best way we could figure to be faithful to that go and do likewise.

Judd ([06:25](#)):

Now, as a Baptist pastor, you have not been afraid to engage in resistance to address political issues, whether it's immigration reform, overturning capital punishment, undoing systematic racism in America before your advocacy. Some people have labeled you with a derogatory term social justice warrior. How do you respond?

Wilson-Hartgrove ([06:49](#)):

Once I remember years ago I was talking to some Lutherans out in the Midwest and the person who was introducing me said, should I introduce you as a liberal Baptist? And I said, well, I don't like liberal and conservative too much. I said, maybe you could just say like a Fannie Lou Hamer Baptist, a Martin King Baptist. I think people forget that there have been different kinds of Baptists in even the American story.

I mean, I'm a John Leland Baptist. He was the abolitionist Baptist in Virginia who got locked up by the state church up there for preaching without a license. He was also influential in getting James Madison to put religious liberty into the constitution. So Baptists have had a long history of recognizing that the power of the state and the message of the gospel don't mix very well. One of my teachers, Tony Campolo, used to say, mixing faith with the power of the states, kind of like mixing manure and ice cream.

[\(08:04\)](#):

It doesn't do much to hurt the manure, but it sure ruins the ice cream. So as for the labels from today's Christian nationalists and others who've been so influenced by this distorted Christian nationalism that has really been cultivated and produced by a very well-funded movement, I think most of those labels, I mean in the political realm, they parallel very much the kind of socialist Marxist labels that we hear in American politics these days. I think they're meant to stir up fear and Jesus taught us that love overcomes fear. So I'd rather be called a love warrior, I guess, than a social justice warrior.

Judd [\(08:57\)](#):

Well, that's a good way to reclaim the narrative for sure. Now, I want to talk about a new book that you have out with Civil Rights Leader and Yale Devin, new school professor Bishop William Barber. It's called White Poverty, how Exposing Myths About Race and Class can Reconstruct American Democracy. In the book, you both urge an end to the political ploys that set poor black people against poor white people. And I'm wondering what are some of the lessons in the book that can be applied to today, especially as we're seeing the Republican Vice presidential candidate JD Vance, referencing his childhood growing up in the poor white community in Appalachia as evidence of failure of certain liberal policies?

Wilson-Hartgrove [\(09:39\)](#):

Oh, it's such a gift to get to do this book with Reverend Barber, and I wanted to do it as a white Southerner as somebody from Appalachia. I mean, bless his heart, JD knew some people in Appalachia. He ain't quite from there, and he's largely made a career off of selling people from Appalachia out. But I take that personally and frankly in terms of public theology, I take it personally because to a large degree, the selling out of my people was facilitated by this distorted religion that we've been talking about, and no one has done more to challenge that than Reverend Barber. I mean, this brother from the South recognizes as someone who's perceived to be black and who is black. I mean, he's steeped in black culture, but his daddy told him, look, you come from white people, Tuska, Roan people and black people.

[\(10:37\)](#):

You got to embrace all this and he seriously has. And when he was the head of the NAACP in North Carolina, he went out into rural communities like the one where I'm from. I mean, that's how we met. He was willing to come out there when I was a teenager and preach to a Southern Baptist church, which he understood enough to know that that was not his base, but he's not accepting the kind of simple calculations of how people are divided and who your most enthusiastic audience is going to be. He really has this deep belief that moral fusion politics can bring people together. That race was created as a way to divide in order to keep most people from joining together to challenge the relatively few people who hold on to most of the resources first in the plantation economy and in every iteration we've had since then.

[\(11:37\)](#):

So to be able to write this book together, there's been a gift. It gave me a chance to help him share so much of his wisdom on this and experience in terms of organizing all across the country, but also to share the story of my own reckoning with how I came to see that. And he helped me see that the very people who loved me and raised me were benefiting from programs that the political leaders we elected undermined and they undermined them in the name of our faith and told us they were representing our traditional values. But I mean, I tell the story in the book, the HUD housing that my grannies lived in when I was a kid, the government cheese that they made, the mac and cheese with all of that was the result of efforts that had been pushed by a coalition of black and white folks voting together in the mid 20th century.

[\(12:42\)](#):

And without them, we wouldn't have had so much of what we had. And since those things have been dismantled in the places where I'm from that places have been hollowed out, I mean, these are some of the poorest places in America. And we really do believe that organizing folks in those places in particular, organizing low income voters in this season is the key. This is the swing vote. Talking to this swing vote is the key to winning because this is the largest group of people who are not going to show up unless somebody talks to them. 34 million voters in 2020 eligible low-income voters didn't show up. And when asked, the main reason was nobody was talking to us. So we are excited to see the Harrison Waltz campaign speaking directly to these issues, talking about child poverty from day one, really putting low wage workers out front and low wage worker movements that have built so much power. And we think that that has to be key. It has to be turned into policy. We need movements to not only push people who are running for office, but also to push folks when they're in office and to push the coalition of folks who can come together around these ideas to get it done.

Judd [\(14:00\)](#):

Going back to your work with Bishop William Barber, you are now working with the Center for Public Theology and Public Policy at Yale, which was founded by Bishop Barber in collaboration with Yale Divinity School. How is the center going to fulfill its mission and preparing a new generation of leaders to put their faith into action?

Wilson-Hartgrove [\(14:20\)](#):

Well, we're very grateful to be at YDS, and it really is an opportunity to institutionalize work that we've been doing with faith leaders across the country. You've mentioned Bishop Barber, who's our founding director, our colleague, Roz Pelli has also been instrumental in bringing this here and decades of work in the labor movement and bringing labor in conversation with the faith community. And the vision is really to introduce students as part of training for ministry to this essential role that clergy and moral leaders can play in building fusion movements to make that a part of the curriculum for seminarians and to give folks in that context the opportunity to practice that alongside people who have been doing it for some time. And so there's an internship program which we're pairing students with movement clergy around the country who are able to invite them into what they're doing.

[\(15:41\)](#):

And it's not just what one person is doing, but it's what a community is doing. And so being in those spaces is really important. We also want the center to be a place where that vision for ministry and that vision for public theology is made available to people who never will come to YDS or who are in the midst of ministry and other places. And so we hosted our inaugural conference this past spring on the moral issues of the 2024 election, and really had 30 of the best Biblical and theological and economics and sociology professors, also legal experts and grassroots activists who are working on issues on the

ground come together and really talk about the issues. So we're very excited this fall to be able to essentially offer the spring conference as an online study that anyone can use. It's available now on the Center's website, and there are 10 videos, 12 hours of content that you can go through with a group and discuss.

[\(16:49\)](#):

And there's some study guide materials there as well. We're going to be having Zoom sort of forum with people who participate in that this falls. We encourage people to check it out and sign up for that. When we talk about public theology and the role of faith in public life, we really think it's about bringing the attention of policy to the things that God is very clear that God cares about in scripture. So poverty and low wages are an issue that we address in this course and the way that connects to union rights. And we have some economists who share about that. We also talk about voting rights because letting every voice be heard and recognizing the image of God and every person really hits the ground in politics in terms of making sure everyone can vote. So yeah, it's issues like that that we're inviting people to consider and to connect with how they read the Bible and how we understand God and who we are as God's people.

Judd [\(17:59\)](#):

Well, I'm definitely interested in taking the course myself. We've mentioned now two books that you've written. There is another one I would like to discuss. It's titled *Reconstructing the Gospel, finding Freedom from Slave Holder Religion*. It compares the Christianity of southern slaveholders riddled with white supremacy with the Christianity of Christ. In the book, you talk about growing up in the South, being inundated with habits and assumptions of what you call this slave holder religion. What were some of those habits and assumptions and what do you say to those that criticize your use of the term slave holder religion?

Wilson-Hartgrove [\(18:40\)](#):

It's a lot to tease out because part of the argument I'm in that book is that a way of being Christian that accommodated the injustice, the abomination of owning other people was developed over generations in the South and that way of being Christian continued. But of course, that's a mixture of the faith that is true and good and is rooted in scripture with a practice and justifications and distortions of that faith that have been passed on. I think one of the most central, I mean there's a lot to it, but one of the most central fragmentations of Christianity that happened because of that was the radical separation between what people believed and affirmed about Jesus, about God, about doctrine in their heads and how they live with their bodies. And in so many ways, I think that division between doctrine and embodied practice has continued, and this notion that you can believe something and it have kind of eternal ramifications, but it not actually change how you treat your neighbor. I find it to be deeply rooted in what the vestiges of slaveholder religion that we live with still. And that has led to a crisis in the church.

[\(20:17\)](#):

The fastest growing religious group in the United States is the nuns. I would say that's not good news for the monastery. It's the N-O-N-E-S, not the NUNS nuns. These are people who don't affiliate with any religious tradition. They don't affiliate certainly with the one they grew up in. And for so many people who grew up in this distorted version of Christianity that what they are rejecting is the right. And so as a pastor and as someone who loves the church, I find it essential that we disentangle those things, right, and that we invite people to practice a faith that can set them free from that and also help them grow into the beloved community.

Judd ([21:08](#)):

So the slave holder religion, it's a description of a corrupted form of Christianity, not the genuine Christianity.

Wilson-Hartgrove ([21:17](#)):

That's right. And that language is language that Frederick Douglass introduced because he had to distinguish between the Christianity that was taught to him as an enslaved person that told him, obey your master that told him, God put you in this place. And he said, I prayed for my freedom for 20 years, but God never heard my prayers until I learned to pray with my feet. He ran away, and when he got away, he found his home in the a ME Church. So he's still a Christian, right? I mean, he meets the Jesus who wants to set the captives free. The faith is at the heart of who he is, but it's not that slaveholder religion that he was taught as a boy.

Judd ([22:04](#)):

Thank you for clarifying that and teasing that out. You're just in your early forties and you've written so many books over a dozen. You've established centers, you've established schools, you've led societal change at the grassroots level. What advice do you have for young people that want to be the same, who want to spearhead faith movements for social change?

Wilson-Hartgrove ([22:29](#)):

Anything that I've been part of I haven't done on my own. So I guess I would recommend that people not so much think about being a spearhead. I mean, leadership is important, but the key for every person created in God's image put here at this time in this place for this moment, the key for any of us is to discern that place where all of who we are, the gifts we were given, the story that made us our gifts and our limitations, where all of that can fit into God's movement and what's happening in the world. And so I'm very grateful to have been able to find a place in the movements that I've been part of, to work for the kind of change that I believe God wants in the world.

Judd ([23:22](#)):

There is one thing though, that I feel as a millennial, I don't know if it's unique to us, but I do feel that including myself, we get engaged with one issue very much engaged, and then sometimes the next day we drop the issue and we pick up another issue without really making a mark in the issue of concern that we previously cared about. It's kind of like this a DD jumping from one issue to the next. Do you have any advice when it comes to something like that? Do you think it's a good thing? Do you think it's a bad thing?

Wilson-Hartgrove ([23:59](#)):

Well, I always want to affirm what I think is good, which is people are opening themselves to be open and vulnerable to any issue. In a world where it's so easy to be cynical, it's so easy to say that's that's their thing. So for people to be engaged, I want to affirm, but my colleague here at the center, Roz Pelli, she often says, we need an analysis. And what I've learned that she means is that to be about genuine work for change in the world, you have to have some framework for understanding how any issue connects to all the others and what are the systems that are in place that make that issue the thing that it is. And so right now in this country and in the world, people's hearts are going out to the people of Gaza because they're experiencing incredible suffering. And you can see it. You can see it on television, you can see it on your phone, whatever screen your that's in front of you, it almost feels like you're

there, but you have to have some way of putting together what kind of change would be good for those people, and how can that change be achieved, and how can I be part of that change?

[\(25:38\)](#):

And what kinds of things might I or others do that could be in name for that cause, but actually detrimental to it. Those are all things that have to be considered, and that takes an analysis. So that's a lot of what we're trying to do at a Center for Public Theology and Public Policy is to give people a framework to understand where your faith connects with issues that matter to you. There are important frameworks to understand how we can make a difference. And the gift of the Christian tradition here in the United States is that we've had a long tradition of faith inspire and moral movements for social change. That's what we teach. And sadly, we don't know these traditions very well. The church doesn't know them very well. We have forgotten and in some cases even suppressed the memory of some of the most powerful movements.

[\(26:42\)](#):

So it's a gift to be able to teach those. And sometimes to even remind folks at YDS that some of these came out of places like YDS, I mean, we read in our introductory course a pamphlet that was written by a young YS grad who went and joined the abolitionist movement right out of YDS in the 1840s. He joins the anti Abolition, the Anti-Slavery Society, and he's going giving these talks town by town and often getting run out of town the day after he gives the talk. But he wrote that down and makes the biblical case for why slavery is wrong when the abolitionist movement was still young, and frankly, many people in the Northeast were still opposed to it. So yeah, we have these traditions and we need to remember them

Judd [\(27:37\)](#):

Well. I'm very excited to see the fruits of the New Center for Public Theology and Public Policy. I'm definitely going to be joining the online course as well. Thank you so much, Jonathan, for speaking with us today.

Wilson-Hartgrove [\(27:50\)](#):

Oh, thank you. It's a joy to be with you.

Introduction [\(27:53\)](#):

Thanks for listening today. We hope you'll tune in again for the next episode of the YDS Quad Cast.