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Jesscia: Welcome to Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived.

We're exploring the ways in which theology permeates all aspects of life.

Through conversations with faculty at Concordia Seminary St. Louis, we will challenge you to deepen your theology and live out your faith in Christ.

I'm your producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau.

I'll talk with a variety of professors on a variety of topics, something different every episode, but all pointing to the intersection of faith and daily life.

It's Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived.

Today we're talking about local establishments, shared spaces where strangers in a community can rub elbows.

Specifically the one where Drew Oswald spent hours drinking, coffee.

Drew is a graduate student of Concordia Seminary St. Louis and has just completed his post-grad STM degree.

He's here to share his experience.

Drew, welcome to the show.

Drew: Thanks for having me, Jessica.

Jesscia: Drew asked me to invite Dr. Ely Prieto to the conversation.

Dr. Prieto is a professor of practical theology and the associate dean of urban and cross-cultural ministry here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis.

Before coming to the US, Dr. Prieto served as a professor at both Lutheran University of Brazil and Concordia Seminary of Brazil.

As a parish pastor in Texas, Dr. Prieto's congregation offered a shared space to the community by way of a coffee truck.

Dr. Prieto, thanks for coming to the show.

Ely: Oh, thank you, Jessica.

Thanks for having me and being with you and Andrew.

It's great.

So I'm excited to be here this afternoon.

Jesscia: So Drew, I invited you to the show because of a unique ministry experience that you were part of for a year and it involved sitting in a coffee shop for hours each week.

Sounds rough.

Drew: Yeah, it was really tough.

I drank a lot of Americanos.

The crosses that we all bear are different.

This got to be mine.

No, it was a wonderful opportunity.

It came about because I stayed for my grad year and know Dr. Kevin Golden, who's the vacancy pastor at Concordia Lutheran Church in Maplewood.

And there's a coffee shop right next door.

And he was very interested in having a just presence in the community.

Hopefully a positive presence, right?

And so he asked me if I would be willing to sit in the coffee shop and maybe some other

spaces.

I did have a beer or two at a local establishment just introducing myself to people.

Jesscia: Rough job, man.

Drew: Yeah, it's tough.

It's tough.

But it was a wonderful experience.

Really grateful for the people that I met mostly.

I would say the friends that I made.

And the things that I've learned too.

That was sort of the surprising thing is you sort of go into this with the idea of like,

I'm going to be serving the community.

I'm going to be helping and I'm going to be doing all of this stuff.

But really, I have been shaped and I've been formed and I've received so many good gifts from God and I've made friends.

And that's been just a tremendous joy.

Jesscia: Now, Dr. Prieto, your experience comes with that coffee truck at your congregation in Texas.

Ely: Yeah, LINK is a ministry.

But then I was engaged with my church, True Christ, Our Savior.

We bought a coffee trailer and we had a truck and we call a mission planter.

And they would drive to different parts of town and serve coffee.

And through that, serving coffee would make connections.

They still doing that.

And that was one part of my experience doing that.

People would come and we had our coffee shop, coffee trailer, and they would say, hey, who are you guys?

What you're doing here?

And we would tell them, you're from a church.

We are planting a church, which is in south of San Antonio.

And the coffee trailer was a way of connecting with people.

I would take my laptop and work at Starbucks or McDonald's or someplace that had the Wi-Fi.

And I got someplace that usually I would go regularly to have coffee.

And that's pretty much what Andrew was talking about.

I had experience to meet the manager, or people that would go there every day.

Also, the same thing I was doing, working.

And that gave me an opportunity for me to connect with people.

And Drew and I talked about that before we met today to do this interview, that we call the Ministry of Presence.

You're always there talking to people and they get to know who you are.

And sometimes you're going to be dressed with your collar and they already look at you and say, oh, this guy's a priest or he's a pastor or whatever, because you're dressed like a priest or a pastor, a Lutheran pastor.

Jesscia: And that would be the typical black shirt, white collar.

Ely: White collar, yes.

Drew: Yeah, and that's typically what I would wear to the coffee shop.

And I would do a lot of homework.

And a lot of people would call me father or different things like that.  
I had somebody ask me if I would hear their confession right there in the coffee shop.  
Just different things.  
People have all of these associations with people wearing a clerical collar already.  
And so you get lots of different experiences based on that.  
Ely: But most of the times I was not really dressed with my collar.  
I just was dressed like a regular guy and would be there working my laptop.  
And of course, sometimes my laptop, I had the little logo that had a cross or something  
and people ask me what you do.  
And then you start to talk about what you do.  
And then you'd be surprised how many people approach you after they know who you are.  
So I think you're creating opportunities to make a bridge and allowing people to come  
and talk to you.  
And sometimes because they are not in this context of a church, which is more formal,  
they're more willing to share and ask you questions because you're sitting drinking  
coffee and you look like a regular person.  
You're not threatening.  
If you're in the church, then behind the church sometimes that idea of power, right?  
Hey, this guy is the pastor.  
And there's no way that people are going to be afraid of you, especially if they know  
you.  
And I think Andrew can share that too.  
But sometimes the manager gets to know you.  
The staff working in that coffee shop knows you.  
And then they start to say, pastor, what are you doing here?  
And then people say, what?  
That guy is a pastor because they hear you, right?  
When you walk in, hey pastor, what are you doing today?  
You came to get another coffee.

Jesscia: Now many of our listeners are not pastors.  
And they're hearing you talk about fulfilling your vocation as pastor.  
But I have a vocation as a customer, as a coffee shop sitter.  
I was writing a series of devotions and I went to the same coffee shop for about a year  
one day a week.

And I had no clothing that would have no uniform that would show that I was a church worker.  
But I was there often and she came up to me and we started talking.  
My pharmacist knows my name and tells me about how his baby is doing.

I mean, there are other ways that we can be a part of shared spaces and communities without  
the vocation of being a pastor.

Just as the vocation is as a customer at a coffee shop or a customer at a grocery store.  
Drew: Be a neighbor where you are.  
And so I think geography is really important here.  
So God has put congregations in places.  
God has put people in places.  
And so be a neighbor where you are.  
Get to know the people who own businesses in your neighborhood.

Because they really care about your neighborhood.  
The geography, you care about that space.  
You care about this time.  
You share that together and that's really great.  
So maybe there are places where you only interact with people who are just like you.  
In our current context, that's not really on the table.  
So the question is more sort of what approach are you going to take to that experience?  
So is it going to be assuming that the world and everyone in the world is evil or out to get you or not interested or hostile in some sort of way?  
Or are you going to be sort of open and follow the eighth commandment?  
Explain things in the kindest way and assume good and believe that God is active in the world and that He's doing things through other people.  
And that He will use you in some sort of way.  
And it's not, there's no formula.  
There's no control.  
But being a good neighbor starts with you.  
And being a good neighbor in shared spaces starts with the kind of conversations that you have.  
And I'm not saying that I'm the model for this by any means.  
It's not easy to do.  
But to be comfortable being uncomfortable, having conversations about faith starts with often other conversations and getting to know people in real sort of ways and hearing again stories about hopes and dreams and families and talking about sports and being made fun of because Nebraska football is really bad again.  
That's happened to me several times.  
So those sorts of things.  
But then, again, not objectifying people but being open to having new friends has been such a blessing to me.

Jesscia: Give me some more details though.

So you were intentionally going to the same coffee shop how often?

Drew: Yeah, average like 10 hours a week.

Some days it would be more or some weeks it would be more, some weeks it would be less.  
Other times, the coffee shop was a really good place for me to land.

I would go and I would buy a cup of coffee and I would sit and do homework or write sermons or whatever I had going on that week.

And then I was very passive.

Mostly because my impression, maybe this is wrong, I don't know.

My impression is that if you approach somebody at a coffee shop with a clerical collar on and say, ask them, have you thought about Jesus lately?

Jesscia: That's creepy.

Drew: It can be.

And my worry is that it's a conversation ender because they'd be threatened.

And I don't personally feel threatening.

But I don't know what people's past experiences have been.

People have so many experiences with the church.

That's one thing that I've certainly learned sitting in the coffee shop is people have, lots of people have wanted to talk.

People would just come up to my table and talk.

Jesscia: Just strangers would just come up to you.

Drew: Yeah, absolutely.

Yeah, absolutely.

Ely: Because you're wearing the collar, right?

They knew, oh, he's a religion, he's a minister, he's somebody related to a church.

Drew: And so they would say, or they'd see a book on my table too, sort of connected.

And so they would just ask if they could talk for a little bit or ask me what I thought about some certain things.

Or actually this happened maybe the most often is other Christians, maybe from other denominations,

came up to be encouraging.

One of my favorite people who I met at the coffee shop does some evangelistic work in Greece and he would sit down and he would talk to me for an hour at a time and he would

encourage me and he would talk about how great God is and all the things that God was doing in his life and his ministry.

And just ask me about the different things that God was doing in my life and encourage me to do the work of the gospel.

And then he would always hand me some cash to take my wife out for a date.

I know, I know.

And those are just the kind of conversations that I wouldn't have had.

And so that was just an example of one just beautiful Christian guy who I got to meet there.

But then also lots of non-Christian people or people who had sort of wandered from the faith.

But sort of some of my favorite conversations are people who I got to see more than once.

And I would sort of, I would get to share things.

So my wife had a baby in October and so with some of the people who worked at the coffee shop we got to talk about my family and our new baby and we got to share stories and really start to share in the experiences of each other's lives.

And it would be easy to go into a situation like that and think like, this is evangelism and I'm going to share the gospel and I'm going to see this effect.

Like tick box one, then we'll tick box two and then we'll get result at the end.

And that's just not what just being present in a shared space is.

It's sort of opening yourself to conversations with people.

And then as I wonderfully learned, open yourself to new friends and open yourself to people that God is giving you to enrich your life.

That was just wonderful.

Ely: Yeah, and I think what Andrew is saying is really great, Andrew, because yes, you're not, of course as Christians, yeah, you want to preach the gospel, you want to share the gospel, you want to evangelize, right?

But even though that's your ultimate goal to do that, you don't go that with that thought that you're going to do that.

You're just going to be there really being salt and light, right?

Just being there.

And maybe you're going to be there for two or three weeks and nobody's going to ask you

anything about being a Christian or anything like that.

But it's really being available and people start to trust you.

One thing that's very interesting that you're talking about, you talk about this man that is doing mission in Greece and he supported you and said, hey, I want you to have a good time with your wife and your kids.

You'd be surprised how many other Christians are doing the same thing.

I was surprised sometimes to be in Starbucks in San Antonio and I was working and then I would see a group of guys talking.

There are other guys, other pastors doing the same thing I was doing.

Drew:

Absolutely.

People that I've had conversations with that were, I thought were really great, right?

I got to think of a couple where actual first person proclamation of the gospel things happened. People who are really hurting, who are crying there in my presence and then you exchange information and you never hear from them again.

That could be discouraging except that I'm not in charge of this person.

I'm not in charge of what ultimately happens to this person and I'm not in charge of making the gospel work.

You just learn to trust that if God is doing something, God is going to do something.

If he's going to use me to play a small part in it, then really great.

So it was a very good thing for me to go through this discipline of giving up control of the conversation.

Where you talk about, of course we're Christians, of course we want everybody to believe the gospel.

Of course I want everybody to be a part of the new creation.

I want everybody to know Jesus.

But if I told every single person that I met in the coffee shop, you're a sinner and Jesus died for you, I'm not sure that that would communicate in ways.

But when you start to know people and you hear their disappointments, we hear the ways that they've been hurt.

When you hear dreams that have been broken, they're similar to the dreams that I've had that have been broken or hurts that I've had.

You can share then just how Jesus has something for them and you can share the gospel in a way where you can sort of help them see the sort of bigger picture of what God is doing and share the hope that we have in a way that's so full and in a way that I...

Because it seems to me that one of the dangers for doing something like this where you say, I'm going to go to this space and I'm going to share the gospel and this is what's going to happen, is you start to see people like objects.

And you start to see the gospel as a hammer or a wrench or whatever tool you want to use in the analogy.

That these are broken people and I'm going to be the one to fix them with my gospel wrench. They're objects that I'm going to fix and I'm only going to serve them.

And that's...

I grew to appreciate so much what God was already doing in the vocations of the folks that I met.

And I wanted to introduce Jesus to them because I could hear their stories.

And I knew, I still know, I still know these stories aren't finished.

These are friends that I have.

God continues to work and shape.

Ely: You mentioned vocations, Andrew, and I'll see you and I talk a couple of times about this.

And sometimes people are not appreciated for what they do.

I learned that from my son, my son before working in a bank for five years.

And I don't know, sometimes we would talk about going to the grocery store and not be patient with the cashier, whatever, because you want to come in and go and they're busy, they're doing other things.

And my son said this, that, have you ever thought about that they also have lives, that they have things that they want to do and sometimes you need to be on their end to see how things are, how they perceive things from their perspective that we don't because I'm the customer, but they're also human beings.

And I think this is beautiful about our theology, the theology of vocations.

And sometimes we don't talk about those things, but we confess that, the Apostles Creed, we confess that God brings together this beautiful shape of people serving and then we trust that also when we pray the Lord's Prayer, give us today the daily bread.

The first article we talk about God providing things for us, but we forget how He provides things for us.

Well, if you go to the coffee shop, somebody's making coffee for you and they're serving you, so they are serving their vocations, right?

But you pay and then you go, but if you, as a Christian, help them to see that their work is very important and we appreciate that.

And at the same time, you can tell them, you know what, I thank God for you.

Tell them that you appreciate that.

Drew: But it might be helpful for us just to see and to actually thank God for the person making my Americano, because I really appreciate that Americano.

I wonder, right, if you're sort of, we rush through some of those things.

We talk about vocation in the abstract, like we all have these vocations, like I'm a student, I'm a father, and I'm a husband, but then we don't think about that each of those vocations has a story involved.

Ely: Yeah, there are human beings there, right?

Drew: Exactly.

And God is doing something really, really beautiful and amazing in our local, in this local neighborhood through this coffee shop where He's providing spaces for people to gather, providing spaces for people to study, providing wonderful fruits of the creation.

God is doing that and He's doing it through these people.

I've enjoyed so much seeing and recognizing the good that God is doing through the people that I interact with.

And that has nothing to do with me serving them.

It does.

Ely: Yeah, they are really serving you.

Drew: Exactly.

It's the opposite of that.

And then I get the joy of saying, that's really great.

Ely: And even though Andrew offers simple compliments like, man, you make really a great cappuccino,  
man, do you know that?

Drew: Don't fake it, right?

Ely: You don't lie and say, like, oh, I really appreciate you, in hopes of sort of bait and switching them into a, I'm going to give you the gospel here because I really...

Ely: And the next time you bring the Small Catechism, I can say that.

Drew: Exactly, right.

Ely: You're not doing that.  
But that can happen to you, Drew, right?  
Because they start to know you the more you go to the same place.  
And then all of a sudden they say, Pastor, I have a shift now.  
I'm going to have a break for 30 minutes.  
Can I sit down with you and talk?  
That happened to me a couple of times.

Drew: You get to see sort of the different ways that God is at work through people in the world.  
And you get to encourage that.  
But then also, like, it's been so enriching for me to hear other people talk about parenting or to talk about their family lives and to be welcomed in to their story.  
I really don't have an agenda in terms of like, I don't have a...

Ely: And I think you should not really have, Drew, because then it's not natural anymore.  
Because you have to check all the boxes, right?  
If I go with an agenda, I have to follow three, four, five points in my agenda.  
And that's not really natural conversation.  
And they will see that you're faking some ways.  
Because you have a second intention, right?

Drew: And then your goal becomes, we need to do this to keep the church open.  
Or we need to do this because we need...

Ely: Exactly.

Drew: You're not actually interested in the other person for their own sake.  
Again, you objectify them.  
You see them as some sort of tool in your life project.  
And that has...

Ely: Yeah, you can see them only pretty much as a number.  
I want my church to grow.  
If I go there to this coffee shop and bring three more people to my church, so you see them as numbers instead of seeing them as people.  
This is why, Drew, what you said before, when you really show that you care, that you want to have a relationship, it's like, after a while, do you know what they're doing there?  
I remember a young girl, she was working in this Starbucks, but she was going to college, a community college in the evening.  
She was working, she was saving.  
Her dream was to become an RN, a registered nurse.  
And so sometimes I would ask about her plans.  
I said, hey, I remember two months ago, you talk about going through that test that you have to pass or whatever.  
How did it go?



And she says, oh, do you remember that?

So she was shocked.

I said, yeah, of course I remember.

We talk about that.

And that's really what shows them that you really care about them as individuals, as people.

Not much that, well, maybe I hope one day you're going to come to my church.

If that happens, it's wonderful.

Of course I'll be thrilled with that.

But I don't need to say this is my goal with you, because of course it is.

We talk about that.

Being a Christian, I want to baptize the whole world, if I could.

But that's not really the way you do with people.

Drew: You baptize people, you don't baptize objects.

Ely: Objects, yeah.

So individuals, then we have connection.

Because what is faith really?

We talk about that, especially in the seminary, this academical pursue of understanding.

What is faith?

It's a gift from God.

It's all true.

But bottom line, faith is a relationship.

Relationship between you and God through Christ.

Drew: A relationship of trust.

Ely: And trust, exactly.

So how are you going to do that with other people?

So I think that's for me, and Drew, you can speak up your mind here too, in your experience.

But it's just, for me, I love moments like that.

Because you don't have control, which for us, Lutherans sometimes, we think we control everything.

We have the best theology, which I believe we do.

But we don't need to say that all the time.

We know we do.

Now, the question is what you do with that, right?

So how this thing works, and you and I talk about that too, Drew, that we believe our theology really works.

Not because it's ours, but because it's God's.

Because you're not talking about abstract ideas in theology, right?

Theology is really applying the Word of God to people's lives, right?

So we know our systematics, our doctrine, things that we teach, the concepts of systematics and teaching of theology.

But really, theology is really when you apply the Word of God to people's lives.

Drew: Yeah, good theology has to do work in the world, right?

It's not just something for me to put on my mantle as a trophy.

I have this great theology, aren't you so proud of it?

That's not what it's for.

It's for people in the coffee shop.

So I can talk for, I can talk about God in ways that are faithful, in ways that are beautiful

and true.

Ely: Oh, absolutely.

And that's when our theology really hits the road.

And one thing that I really appreciate about what you just said, Dr. Prieto, is you're being unafraid and courageous to talk to people and being willing to learn from people who don't have the degrees that you have, who don't have the experience that you have.

And yet, and maybe especially because of those things sometimes, bring questions to the text,

bring questions to the church that we haven't thought about in a while, or just their experience, the gospel is going to speak to them in a different sort of way.

And being willing to listen and then incorporate those ways or those things in ways that are they're patronizing.

You can do the best that you can and love them and be loved by them.

Ely: This is why you are building up relationships, trust.

So this is something that will not happen the first time you go to that coffee shop, right?

Drew: I pray that God would use me to share the promises of God whenever that opportunity presents itself, not in a forced way, but in a way that comes across and can be received as love, because that's really what it is.

And I know that some people have been so scarred by, you mentioned the sort of the pyramid

marketing advertising way of evangelism that some people sort of go, some people have been scarred by that kind of thing because there's no depth of relationship with a church or with a group of people that comes along with it.

Jesscia: Yeah, if you objectify somebody as only a customer, that's different than being their friend.

Drew: Right.

And I just think it's not that people are intentionally kind of doing that thing, right?

It's just that sometimes maybe we want to move too quickly or we just don't.

It's hard for us to think of another sort of way.

And so I don't want to downplay sort of anybody's attempt to share the gospel.

Right.

But for maybe for us to think about how if there are somebody new in our lives, how much of a relationship we would require from them until we let them give us advice, especially life changing news also.

And then just to respect that in other people that it's important to really love first.

And that means listening.

That means bearing burdens.

That means doing all the things that we do, sharing stories, laughing together, those kinds of things.

Jesscia: And this is for all Christians.

You're not just speaking to clergy.

This is all of us.

Drew: Definitely not.

That's exactly right.

This is for everybody.

And this is because it really is just kind of learning how to be a neighbor, learning how to love people.

And God is throughout my experience, it's not even that profound of an experience. It's sitting in a coffee shop and drinking coffee and just talking to the people who are sitting at the table right next to me if they want to talk or talking to the people who work there.

God is shaping me to be more like Jesus in as much as see people more like people and to see them as people who have real stories, real hopes, real dreams, real disappointments, real heartbreak, and to receive that sort of full experience and then to be able to speak into that in a way that also provides them a full hope.

And then in doing that, you sort of provide full yourself too.

You give of yourself and always imperfectly, but if you try to give Jesus away without giving yourself away, I don't know, I'm not really sure that that's going to stick with some people.

Ely: So what you're talking about here is not only for pastors, like you said, Jessica, anybody can do that.

Drew: I went there to drink coffee, but how am I a Christian drinking coffee?

I think part of it is, I mean, part of this, why I think this sort of shared space idea is really important is you just think geographically, God has put people in places and congregations

in places and we should be in those places, right?

And we should be present.

And again, you don't know the outcome.

You do know the outcome though, if you're not in the space, you don't know what conversations you can have if you're in the space.

You do know that you will have zero conversations if you're not in the space.

So if I-

Ely: What you prefer, right?

Jesscia: My final question for you, Dr. Prieto, what do you want our listeners to remember?

Ely: Oh, that's a good one.

I didn't expect that one.

One thing that I think I would like people to remember is that I always see this as what I call incarnational ministry, that you become really flesh and bone with people.

And that, you know, when we talk about that also, that we believe that you're going to rise again, right?

That you're going to, when Jesus comes back, you're going to rise and he's going to- Usually we talk about religion as something more, oh, God really cares about my soul, which is true.

But it's more than that, right?

Jesus is healing bodies too.

He rose and he says to Thomas, touch me, right?

I'm not a ghost.

So Jesus is real, right?

And we also the same way, you're body and soul, right?

And so people are like that too.

People have feelings, people have dreams, people have frustrations, people have joy, things to celebrate, things to cry about.

And I think we as church, and when I talk about church, as all of us Christians, we

are made the same way and we appreciate when people can come to us and minister to us in the real way, right?

Like body and soul, real incarnational, I would say.

So I think, think about those things when you go and go anywhere you go, in public space, right?

Or in a coffee shop, in a restaurant, whatever, and try to be what you are as a Christian, right?

You are a Christian, so then be a Christian.

But in a natural way, that you are there with your presence, with your love, which is not yours but it's Christ in you, right?

That love that goes through your life, reaching out to other people.

Like Drew was talking about before, right?

We don't treat people like numbers, right?

You treat people like human beings, which God also created in love.

And if you are willing to listen to them, then you have a chance to really talk about Christ.

That's my final word I would say.

Jesscia: What about you, Drew?

What do you want our listeners to remember?

Drew: I think the thing that comes to mind, and this is just for me personally, is that my experience sitting in a coffee shop with a clerical caller changed me in really good ways because of the way that people received me, accepted me, and were my friends. And that was a gift of God.

The joy that it was to share a space with people that I wouldn't normally share a space with was beyond what I could have imagined.

And I'm not sure other people will have that same experience, but you won't know until you share a space with other people.

And so I'd try it and see what happens, I guess.

Jesscia: Well that's it for today.

I'd like to thank our guests.

Drew Oswald, thanks for being here.

Drew: You're welcome.

Thank you so much for having me.

Jesscia: Dr. Ely Prieto, thanks for being on the show.

Ely: Sure, thank you.

Thanks for having me.

Appreciate it.

Jesscia: And thank you for listening.

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Join me next time when we talk about the intersection of theology and daily life, when it's Tangible:

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See you next time.

Bye.