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SAVANNAH COMMUNITY MEMORIES PROJECT
“FAITH IN ACTION” RESIDENCY
INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

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SUBJECT: REV. BILLY HESTER



Billy Hester

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15:47:41:05 [Tom Kohler]: Name and your, and your how to spell it. You're gonna say, my name is...

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15:47:43:19 [Rev. Billy Hester]: And then you tell and say, wake up Billy, too. When I need to do that.

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15:47:48:06 [Tom Kohler]: Alright. And, and, and we won't belabor 'cause we are in the....

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15:47:52:06 [Rev. Billy Hester]: Yes, I get that. Yes. Well, okay. Well, and I know you keep, yeah. Okay. We'll move along. Okay, great. We're

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15:47:56:17 [Eric Darling]: Good when you are.

15:47:57:04 [Tom Kohler]: Alright. Reverend Billy...

15:47:59:02 [Rev. Billy Hester]: Can I say Tom or you don't want me to? No, that's fine. Okay.

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15:48:02:06 [Tom Kohler]: Reverend Billy Hester. Thanks am being with us today. We appreciate it.

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15:48:04:16 [Rev. Billy Hester]: Thank you Tom.

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15:48:05:17 [Tom Kohler]: And the first thing I'd like for you to do is say your name and also spell your name if you would please.

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15:48:10:22 [Rev. Billy Hester]: Billy Hester. B-I-L-L-Y-H-E-S-T-E-R. You want he, his and him pronouns, please. Okay. He, his, him, he, him his, something like that.

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Billy Hester

15:48:23:11 [Tom Kohler]: Got it. Thank, thank you so much. Okay. Let's just start out with a little bit about you. I mean, where you were born and where you've traveled and where you've come back to.

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15:48:33:16 [Rev. Billy Hester]: Okay. Well I was born in Savannah, grew up on 1 0 1 East 65th Street, which rights on the corner of Abercorn. And, you know, fortunate love Savannah of course. And love that it's an old port city because we have so many different cultures here. And that's played an important role in my life. On my block of two houses to my right were Catholics then it was a Baptist, then another Catholic. Across the street

15:49:04:05 were Greeks and Jewish, uh Methodist. Then across Abercorn you had the Kaminskys, the Adels, the Jospins, the Minkovitz in back. I mean, it was a melting pot. We all went to school together. We played on the ball teams together. And so when I went to New York City many years later, I felt like I was home. You know, I was on East 65th Street. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

15:49:29:18 And, and just loved the diversity. Always have. Yeah.

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15:49:35:02 [Tom Kohler]: And then when you, when you say you jumped quickly, I went to New York City. Where'd you graduate high school? And then where'd you go to college? And then what took you to New York?

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15:49:44:12 [Rev. Billy Hester]: Well, I wanted to go to Savannah High, but my mother remarried right when it was time. It was during the busing years. And in fact, I gave my grandmother's address 'cause that's where I used to live. And they, my friends said, Billy, you should have tried it, because they kept calling your name and homeroom for two weeks. But I, I had a good friend who was going to coach at Savannah Christian. He asked me to come out there and play, to start kind of their football team. And so I went out to Savannah Christian through church. The church was always important for

15:50:19:09 me growing up as a child. My dad died when I was four. He, in 1963, felt bad one night... We were on 65th Street, drove himself to Memorial Hospital, which isn't far, and ended up dying of a heart attack at age 35. I was four, my sister was seven, and my mother just became a, a widow like that. And yeah, that of course the, the, the church for me became a village

15:50:48:07 of raising us and helping us and helping our confidence with everything. So right away I saw how a faith community could benefit people. It wasn't so much about what you believe so much, it's how you helped each other, you know. And it really

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built my confidence up, you know, I, I, and kind of, I've always been trying to think of the outsider and part of it, back in

15:51:15:03 the sixties, most people had two parents, even if they weren't getting along, they stuck. They were together. And so I was kind of an oddball, having one parent and your dad, the male figure was probably the dominant person in the culture. So I always kind of felt different about that.

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15:51:33:19 [Rev. Billy Hester]: And also, I was very heavy or husky as we called it back then. And that made me feel odd. Helped me playing football. But I always worried about the weight limit and if I'd get to play. But, but yeah, so, but the church in all of that helped me build up confidence, self-esteem. It's where I discover my love for singing and the arts, which would then, after I realized it was time to stop getting my brains knocked

15:52:04:05 out from with football and I, I focused on the arts, went to Valdosta State and got a degree in theater. Back in those days it was either New York City or LA if you wanted a career. And so I was more into live theater. So went from Valdosta to, to New York City, did summer stock in Vermont, New Jersey, and moved to 29th Street between Madison Park and a tiny room

15:52:36:05 that with another guy. And just, just trying to make it right down the block. I was walking around in the neighborhood and on the corner of fifth Avenue and 29th I saw a, a beautiful old church and had the sign, Norman Vincent Peele. I said, I've heard of that guy, you know, so maybe I'll try that. Church. And Peele, of course, wrote the power of positive thinking. And it was, I learned later

15:53:04:22 was one of the first combined faith with psychology. Like therapy wasn't a bad thing. In fact, they had that kind of department. And years later when I would work there on staff, the senior minister would encourage the staff to be in therapy. So kind of this whole mindset was changing for me in college. I had met gay people in the theater and I had always kind of judged them. And then when I had a, my best friend was gay, he really

15:53:39:01 wasn't out, but it was like, you could kind of tell he might be gay.

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15:53:42:11 [Rev. Billy Hester]: But I found out years later, he was scared to tell me that. 'cause he was scared of losing my friendship with him. And so, but he was my best friend. And so that made me say, well he's, he's a great guy. You know, so, so then went to New York and go to Marble and they have a head ushers who's gay, you know, somebody on staff who's gay. I'm going, wait a minute, wow, it's okay to be gay, I think. And then I ended up going to seminary and studying at one of my major

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papers was on the Bible in homosexuality. And I said, wow, the, this is something I want.

15:54:17:19 And, and then in the, I was there from 81 to 91 and so the AIDS epidemic hit. And so one of the first things that came when I came back here, one of the, kind of my biggest thing right away was something we helped form something called the AIDS Interfaith Network. And it was 1993 and you know, it was, oh people were, it was rough in

15:54:43:07 New York City, but down here it was almost not even talked about. And it wasn't, you know, I was very interested in having a place where all people felt accepted. Back then it wasn't talked about. I think Unity and the Unitarian Universalist Church, they would say they were all accepting but not kind of promoting where, you know, and gay people come on, you know, that kind of thing. So there was that aspect. But with the AIDS thing, it wasn't just acceptance. It was what you were hearing from places of worship

15:55:16:15 was condemnation and meanness and not just to them but to their families. And so a handful of us got together, we'd meet at Asbury Memorial at our, my church and we'd offer some services around town to offer that there's a different way of seeing this to offer compassion, not just for the person

15:55:42:06 with AIDS, but with their families too.

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15:55:44:23 [Rev. Billy Hester]: Mike Freeman, who you may know, was a big part of that. Diane Fuller, that's going ways. The fact Diane Fuller, Bill Broker of Georgia Legal, I think Bill Willoughby was part of that. I think Jamie Morey, Jamie Moore and who, somebody I really gotta give a shout out to is Gregory Eason. I don't know if you remember Gregory at first at Phillips AME church. He was our only African American. And it was, especially at that time, really rough for the African American church. And

15:56:17:18 Gregory was really a brave soul and did a lot of great work for us. So I, that was a very special time of working together and getting to know people of other denominations and faiths.

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15:56:31:09 [Tom Kohler]: Absolutely. Yeah. And just to say it, I mean, to your point, I mean, that was not a happy time.

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15:56:40:22 [Rev. Billy Hester]: No, tough. And, and it, what would blow me away, and I know I've mentioned it, was how the families were treated too. Not just the person but their families.

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15:56:53:16 [Tom Kohler]: And then so that, so you're back in Savannah by now?

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15:56:57:04 [Rev. Billy Hester]: Yeah, back in Savannah. Yeah. What happened is, I, I'm sorry, I was in New York and got more and more involved with Marble Collegiate and also got more and more involved with the woman who was an actress. And I said, two of us who aren't gonna be in this business in theater if we're going to get married and have a family. So she was better at it than me. And I also had this passion. I had a stepfather who died in a boating accident in 1982 down here. And, and just, I had always

15:57:29:22 thought about going into the ministry, but after that accident was like, yeah, go ahead and, and jump into this. And went to seminary at Princeton, which is about out hour outside of New York, and did my intern work at Marble Collegiate and in New York. And then after I graduated, I worked for two years as an associate at Marble.

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15:57:51:02 [Rev. Billy Hester]: And again, kind of helped develop this more compassionate approach to diversity as a whole. You know, came down here as an associate at Wesley Monumental for two years. And then I heard that the denomination, Methodist denomination was gonna close Asbury Memorial. There's a guy named Tom Kohler who lived right behind it. In fact that, and he showed me the, one of my first days at that church, he took me around

15:58:22:01 town and showed me how things were and loved it. So yeah, so what we did, that church was about to close. It had got, their youngest member was 66, their average age was 80. Had about 25 of those folks who were like, remember the Alamo kind of people we're gonna stick it out to the very end. And what my wife and I knew was theater. So we invited everybody to come audition for shows. And the shows worked. And then people in the show

15:58:54:01 started singing the choir, the choir got better and the word got out that this was a safe place for everybody. And so that started growing. I had another church too in Thunderbolt Wesley Oak. 'cause both churches when I first went there, couldn't afford a full-time minister. And so I did that for eight years. And then both of them could have a full-time minister after that. But the interfaith, I'll never forget, right when I first started here,

15:59:22:09 there was some type of interfaith event in a rabbi who's long retired, said to me, Billy, they don't know how to do interfaith here. They think, they think, they think Methodist and Baptist having an event together is interfaith or Protestant, Catholic, you know? And yeah, and I'd come from New York. And so I always wanted it to

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be better and better. Gosh, around 2012 I helped start something called the Gathering where we were trying to

15:59:54:09 bring in progressive theologians of all faiths to try to again, educate people a little bit about there's nothing to be afraid of. And that we all have the golden rule, you know, some basic stuff. And so we could respect each other better. Rabbi Haas was part of that. Al Addington was a big part of that. It was just one we couldn't afford bringing some of these people

16:00:24:10 in.

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16:00:24:22 [Rev. Billy Hester]: But, so we started kind of doing it ourselves and just, you know, could kind of just burned out after several years with trying to do our own churches. Plus it's, it's very frustrating here. It was very hard to get interfaith stuff happening. And it, part of it is every, you know, it's not a church culture anymore. So people are really worried about their own church and they're working hard at trying to stay alive instead of doing things with others, you know, but, but there

16:00:57:17 have been... Congregations in Service is a great thing that's been started by First Presbyterian, I think initiated that here where people of other of all face gather for a project in town, like a cleanup of hospice and things like that. So that's been a big key thing. And then not too long ago, kind of got a special invitation and that grew out of gun violence, I think is

16:01:26:04 the Savannah Pastors Alliance. Sometimes they hear Savannah Alliance of Pastors, which has traditionally been an African American group. But they really made a special invitation to, for everybody to come together. And we really started working get, this was a really bright spot for us in what's happening. As I shared with the group, this is the best of, of interfaith, interdenominational, ecumenical stuff we've ever had in Savannah. Pastor Thurman Tillman was a big part of

16:01:59:17 that. Rabbi Haas, Reverend Claire Merri, who was my associates, very involved. That's, and, and so that's was really hopping. And then the pandemic kind of sh shut everything down, you know, it's been really hard to get that back going again.

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16:02:18:23 [Tom Kohler]: So there's like, I mean there's an evolution of this idea of interfaith and people finding each other, right? And finding common ground evolution was moving and then Covid kind of grabbed you by the neck.

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16:02:30:03 [Rev. Billy Hester]: It did strangled. And another part of that before Covid too, I want to give a shout out to Mickve Israel and Robert Haas would have a Tri-Faith service that I'd be involved with. And then Masjid Ali, who, who passed away

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sadly, but Ibrahim, who's followed to, in his footsteps, we would have a service together. And that was always very meaningful. Now, one of the more recent things that's kind of kicked in is JUST, Justice Unites Savannah Together over social justice issues that we

16:03:06:12 can all agree about, you know, like affordable housing, education. Those are the two big emphasis of it right now. And you know, that it's, it is so hard for, as you know, to change systemic things that are systemic and, but JUST is really, when you have so many people involved from different

16:03:33:01 backgrounds and, and faiths, you know, I feel like that stands more of a chance of making a difference.

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16:03:40:14 [Tom Kohler]: Can you give us a little background, like maybe just size and scope of that organization and

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16:03:45:00 [Rev. Billy Hester]: Sure. There's a, the, the parent organization is called Dart. And they send like a regional director who tries to coordinate everybody. And again, it's not like it, they don't tackle something like abortion where, or, or the gay issue that might, they want something that everybody can buy into. So more people can be more diversity there, which is great. And they will, we've had like a meeting with the city council and we'll have like 500 representatives there of all

16:04:22:10 the faiths and everything. So it, that's called Nehemiah Action when Nehemiah called in a bunch of people to make change. So everybody's supposed to be working at their own place of worship to gather these folks together for that big event, knowing what the topics, you know, what we're, and we're supposed to train that our congregations a little bit alike on

16:04:45:11 the affordable housing situation and give the, the facts of how hard it is for anybody to afford something. You know, those kinds of things. So I mean, we all know how it is hard to change it on our own.

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16:05:03:08 [Rev. Billy Hester]: The, so it's just encouraging to see something like this being put together. One other group that's been important to me is well on on, and it was started after the shooting at, at Mother Emanuel Church and in Charleston where we've really emphasized gun violence. And we've started an orange ribbon ministry where we put an orange ribbon on our fence at Asbury Memorial with the name and age of a person who's been killed by gunfire here in our area. And we've tied in

16:05:39:01 with a group called Moms Demand Action for Common Sense Gun Laws and Allen Westbrook as a big part of that for us. That we've, so that's another aspect where,

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and where I've seen people of color, different colors coming together for this cause. It is just another thing that comes to mind where I see, you know, these weren't people just from my church or their church,

16:06:05:23 but just all over. So

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16:06:07:23 [Tom Kohler]: Let me ask, and I, lemme ask, I can remember y years ago, 'cause I did live in the, in the neighborhood where your church is you, I think you had tried to establish relationships congregationally in the neighborhood. My memory was, that was frustrating. So I'd like to talk a little about

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16:06:27:07 [Rev. Billy Hester]: Yeah.

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16:06:28:02 [Tom Kohler]: What are the barriers and what's the, what's the politic, if you will, of this idea? Of, of interfaithness?

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16:06:33:16 [Rev. Billy Hester]: Right. Well, yeah. And, and, and I probably didn't go about it the right way at first. 'cause I'm, I, I big into race relations and so I wanted, especially since I was at a minority neighborhood, I wanted black people at our church, you know, and stupid me said, well, first of all, they probably were kept out of that church for a long time and didn't have any good feelings about it. Secondly, they have their own faith communities. But it then a big issue for us was the

16:07:03:22 acceptance of gay and lesbian people. And that's a big thing. And I, I don't know if you know Eddie Kilborn, he was a storyteller. He's not local, but Ed Kilborne. Ed Kilborne, yeah, ed Kilborne. Well he was part of a, a Methodist church in Atlanta that was very much like Asbury, except they were about nine years ahead of us.

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16:07:24:18 [Rev. Billy Hester]: And they wanted to emphasize both those things. Gay and lesbian acceptance and the, and in the black community. And they just, he, I remember he did a concert at Asbury and he talked to me after he says, it's just been so frustrating because, you know, it, it's hard sometimes in the black community to accept the gay and lesbian people. And we just had to say, well, with our integrity we have to. And so we're not gonna get as many black people. Now on the other hand, what's really

16:07:56:05 interesting, so we, our administrator is gay. He's made some headway with some of these, and I don't know if these people know he's gay, but they love him. You know,

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they've built relationships with him. And so we've had done some block parties together and unfortunately Freddie Patrick was a big part of all of that. And Freddie died during the pandemic and that's taken some of the momentum out again. But we're gonna build it up again.

16:08:24:13 We're gonna build it up.

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16:08:25:23 [Tom Kohler]: So, I mean, it's, it's, it's, it's not a straight line.

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16:08:28:07 [Rev. Billy Hester]: No, it isn't. Boy, it sure isn't. Yeah, you're right.

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16:08:34:20 [Tom Kohler]: Talk a little bit about your theater program and I'm curious how, if that has, how many different congregations or parts of the community you're very robust theater program has touched over the years.

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16:08:46:04 [Rev. Billy Hester]: Okay, will do. And just, just say a little bit more about that. Not a straight line. I wish somebody would've told me that a long time ago, you know, and maybe they did, but I didn't listen to it. But if you don't, if you can accept that, it sure makes it, you know, the tough times easier, you know, 'cause you know it's going to take a step in the right direction sooner or later. So yeah, the theater brought us back and we would have two musicals a year. It was just fascinating how that worked. And boy, do I have a story for you if you want it, but that,

16:09:20:04 that's unbelievable. But, but just to make a long story short, we've grown. So we weren't able to do as much theater 'cause our rooms are being used now and, and everything. So, but back in those days, that's all we had.

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16:09:38:08 [Rev. Billy Hester]: But what we do now is something called God on Broadway, where in October we weave elements of a Broadway musical into the worship service. It's a different musical each Sunday in October. So there are usually five of them. And what's wonderful is that people of all faiths come to that service, you know, you know, before the pandemic we'd average about 250 a service during God on Broadway it's 500, and it's

16:10:09:05 Mickve Israel. And it, and it's not just because we're doing Fiddler on the Roof, it's everything. And I just had it, we just did a memorial service for Angela Beasley. And, and it was a really, it was a fabulous service and we had our puppets all over

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the stage. And, and a woman texted me this week and said, if I wasn't Jewish, I'd be coming a two year church. I said, oh,

16:10:34:14 come anyway, I said, we have lots of Jewish people who come. And I said, Rabbi Haas preaches for me during the summer. So, you know, but also I got another email from a woman from Sun City who's, somebody told her about her church and she's watching it. 86. She said she's always been a spiritual person. She grew up in Long Island and she was told in a bible study that in Long Island that she wasn't, and she was discouraged to come anymore. 'cause she asked too many questions. Oh my goodness. You know? And

16:11:13:14 my thought is, we love questions, questions are the right way to go. You know, that's, that's a good thing. And so she, here she was 86, you could just see her doing cartwheels in her email. 'cause she was so excited that there was this place of love and acceptance. Just real quick with theater story. So I, when I lived on East 65th Street, you may have heard this before we moved, but I'd come back to see my grandmother and my

16:11:43:01 neighborhood friends and I come one time and they say two men have moved into the Conway's house that the Conways had moved.

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16:11:53:02 [Rev. Billy Hester]: And two, two men from New York. Oh, really? So we're, of course, we never meet them. We see them from a distance. We meet them and you know, we're calling them queers and all the kind of just making jokes like we teenagers would, especially back in those days. So, you know, then go to college and go to Marble in New York and go to seminary. My whole attitude has changed. I'm coming to create this place. And our first production was the Pirates of Penzance. And we had this guy

16:12:25:17 named Nathan Hebron build our sets for us, young guy. And he liked it so much, he said, I'm gonna keep doing it. He's gonna study that guy's doing Broadway sets now. And, but we lost him right after our first show. And I'm not good at anything like that. I don't know how to do that. And some old, so we, it's one of our first early years at Asbury. This man comes up to me like this after church. My name's Dix Elliot, and

16:12:53:02 it's been smoking for years and very flamboyant. He said, I used to do theater sets in New York and I'd love to help you if you need any help. I said, Dix, you got the job, you got the job. So Dix would create these elaborate painting things all here on Henry and Waters, you know, in the social hall, this guy. And he loved doing it. He'd be on the floor with these canvases and the social hall. He'd be coughing and dying and coughing. I'd said, Dix, stop working. You're going to, he said, I'd love,

16:13:25:23 this is my church. I love it. I'd, I'd be glad to die right here. You know. So anyway, so we became very close friends. And so one night he comes to, we had a show, he

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comes to the church. He said, Billy, my car broke down. I got a ride to the church. Can you take me back home? I said, sure, Dix, sure. So we lock up the church together at the end of the night. We get in the car and I pull out the lot. I say Dix, I'm sorry, I should know this,

16:13:54:19 but where do you live? He says, I live on 65th Street between Abercorn and Habersham. And I'm driving down Habersham and I'm saying, this can't be one of those guys I used to make fun of.

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16:14:14:22 [Rev. Billy Hester]: So we turned onto 65th and he says, I live right. And I go, Dix, you don't have to tell me where you live. I know right where your house is. Sure enough, he was one, the one of my best friends who helped me grow. Asbury Memorial was the guy I used to make fun of as a teenager. Unbelievable.

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16:14:37:20 [Tom Kohler]: I'm glad you told that story.

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16:14:40:04 [Rev. Billy Hester]: It's unbelievable. Oh my gosh.

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16:14:44:11 [Tom Kohler]: That's more like intra-faith, in a way. Wow. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Since you're telling stories, I'm gonna get back to the text in a minute, but since you're telling stories, this is an interfaith story. Tell, tell about when you bought your house.

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16:15:00:03 [Rev. Billy Hester]: Oh, okay. So this is crazy too. So the Buchsbaums, it was the Buchsbaums' house. I just met Aaron Buchsbaum, you know, because our realtor, we were, well, we saw this house and it, we just, Sherry, my wife and I loved it, but it was cost too much for us. And then, then we went all around Savannah and we just didn't like anything. We

16:15:30:19 said, boy, we love that first house. I wonder if we could talk to them and see if, you know, we'll try to get as far as we can, but just, maybe they'll take it if it's lower. In the meantime, I, I I said we, we did have mutual friends in the community. Michael and Elizabeth Terry, who were dear souls were members of Asbury. I wondered if they talked to Aaron some of some about the poor ministerial couple or something.

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16:15:58:15 [Rev. Billy Hester]: But, but so we meet with them and just to get to know each other. And he finally out, my dad had a restaurant and he said my, it was kind of like the Elizabeth's of its day. It was at the City Market. But back in those days, not many people traveled downtown like that. But he loved going there. And especially to hear a, a man named Ted Brown, who was kinda like a Nat King Cole type singer with a guitar and was

16:16:29:04 kind nationally known had he sang for something like at Kennedy's inauguration or something like that. And, but he was, he, he has an album of Savannah and things like that. They loved hearing him. And I, so he told, told me that he just, he and his wife loved hearing him. And I just said, Aaron, you know, it just so happens I probably, one of the few people, I have an album of Ted Brown's and, and Aaron said, oh, well Billy, if you make me a copy of that album, I give you the house for the lower

16:17:02:08 price. And I knew, and I said, oh my gosh. So that, so I made 'em a bunch of them. But, but here's the deal with Aaron Bucshbaum, you know, we're living in his house. I had heard he was an attorney, and then Aaron dies and I read his obituary. I couldn't believe I was living in this man's house, the social justice. I mean, it just reaped off the pages during the civil rights. Come to find

16:17:31:23 out, he represented one of my mentors, Sammy Clark, who was Tom could explain Sammy better than I can, but a a force of nature with civil rights back in the sixties. And, and was it a inspiration for all of us who were younger and why? You know, there's so many reasons why it's my passion. But Sammy's certainly one of the reasons in the connection with Aaron and Sammy

16:18:01:06 and Aaron and social justice. And we get to live in this house. Wow. Yeah.

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16:18:07:07 [Tom Kohler]: That's remarkable. Yeah, that's remarkable. And then I, I would want to talk a minute about Sammy Clark because you know, many of the people I know that are ministers of my generation, Sammy Clark. Reverend Clark was the person that involved him in the ministry because they could see the, the social justice, the radical possibility of ministry. And, and, and that really is the role he played here, including the first inner city night shelter.

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16:18:32:20 [Rev. Billy Hester]: Right.

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16:18:33:17 [Tom Kohler]: Which before there was any notion of responding to quote homelessness.

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Billy Hester

- 16:18:39:06 [Rev. Billy Hester]: And as you're talking, it's coming back to me, I think like before Wesley Community Centers was called, I think he called it Bethlehem Center, something like that. It was like the Bethlehem Center. And it was Sammy and then an older woman at my church named Eunice Stockton. Eunice and Sammy were very close and they had this Bethlehem Center and here was this White guy really living with, standing up for
- 16:19:10:14 those who are often overlooked. And he said, that's, that sounds like Jesus to me. You know? Oh, that's another big thing too, Tom. That's, that I just is important. That's been important for me. That's helped me so much of growing up, our faith, kind of with the Billy Graham stuff and everything was about getting to heaven, being saved. And through education and seminary and everything I've, I've seen that wasn't really Jesus' message
- 16:19:43:19 at all. He hardly talked about heaven. It was all about bringing the kingdom of God on Earth and that this is what it's about. And two times 3:13, when Constantine made Christianity the national religion, we all thought that was a good thing. It wasn't so good. He was using it to get soldiers in his army 'cause they could then go to heaven. So it started emphasizing this heaven thing. Then also after the Civil War, that's another time they
- 16:20:12:17 started to emphasize heaven because it took their, they didn't have to focus on changing things here. So it was really a strategy. Yeah. And then unfortunately it worked. But we're getting better. We're evolving.

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- 16:20:31:20 [Tom Kohler]: So what's going on this Savannah right now that in terms of faith in action, biggest term, what's going on in Savannah right now with regard to faith in action? I mean, what are the three or four things that if you were pointing somebody to say, go look here, go look here, go look here, go look here. What are the three or four things you point people to?

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- 16:20:52:06 [Rev. Billy Hester]: Again, the pandemic affected everything. Congregations in Service has started back up again. They've just had a meeting and they've got a set date for their next thing. Now I've got it in my calendar, I don't have it here, but then JUST, Justice Unites Savannah Together. That's a really big thing here too. But I think it's just growing. You know, I think I mentioned, I don't know if I mentioned it to you or not. I just discovered Huston Smith, did I share him? Huston Smith
- 16:21:26:15 was a Christian, was was the son of a, a Christian missionary. And he thought he had a Methodist mission... He thought he was going to be one too. And he had, was just about to start. But then he decides, you know, instead of bringing my faith to them, what I'm gonna do is learn about everybody else's faith. And he becomes the

Billy Hester

expert New York Times bestseller on all religions. He died not too many years ago, like at 97, but he has

16:21:57:04 become... I never had heard of him and H-U-S-T-O-N Smith. And that it's, it's exciting to discover people like him, Richard Rohrs another one, Marcus Borg, where you, we realize that I've just scratched the surface with faith and spirituality, but also interfaith and how we're all in this

16:22:24:10 together and that we're really all one kind of thing, you know?

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16:22:29:05 [Tom Kohler]: Yeah. Well, are there things you wanted to make sure that you were gonna talk to us about that I haven't given you a, a little prompt for? Or are you feeling like

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16:22:38:04 [Rev. Billy Hester]: The, the only other thing too, Methodism was a big part. We, we, our congregation left the Methodist denomination in 2019 when they would not, there was a big international conference on voting what to do with the gay issue, whether they'd be more inclusive and they would not. We thought it might happen. And then we left. Unfortunately, those who won the day had now decided to create another more conservative religion. And now they've got a lot of other people leaving

16:23:09:07 Methodism, which is a shame. But we're still very Wesleyan. And I love John Wesley's story about here in Savannah. It's big, been always been a big part of my life. My, my relatives were a big part of getting John Wesley's statue here. And as you know, he came here as a very rigid clergyman that nobody liked except maybe Sophie Hopkey. But, and so he basically, Sophie

16:23:39:15 decided to marry somebody else and he refused to serve her communion and family was about to bring him up on charges. And he decides to run back to England before that all breaks out. And he kept a great diary and he wrote in his diary, I came to save the heathens, meaning the Native Americans. I came to save the heathens, but who's going to save me? And he's at his lowest low. And he's with the Moravians, who he was impressed with when he made this trip to Savannah. And he hears a

16:24:11:02 commentary on the book of Romans about God's grace and unconditional love. And he was always, you know, focused on working hard, working hard to earn God's love. And then he has this feeling that where he's known for saying, my heart was strangely warmed and he understood unconditional love. But the great thing about it is it made him more or more of a loving person. And it changed his emphasis. And he started being much more compassionate and

Billy Hester

16:24:41:14 started this major social justice ministry in England. And many historians say, you know, and it was because of the, the workhouses, the child labor laws. He helped people who were thrown into prison for indebtedness. And what's really cool, a lot of history teachers will say, there would've been a revolution, like Les Miserable, a French revolution in England had it not

16:25:08:18 been for John Wesley's influence and bringing up the common people. So that's was my heritage too, in knowing that. So that was, that's pretty cool.

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16:25:21:06 [Tom Kohler]: What congregation I should, what congregation were you in as a child?

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16:25:25:01 [Rev. Billy Hester]: Oh, Epworth. Epworth Methodist Church. And we know a number of people who grew up in just a dynamic church, put out a lot of ministers. Closed, unfortunately, now it's across the street from the Vault vault. But yeah.

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16:25:42:09 [Tom Kohler]: Well, thank you.

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16:25:44:22 [Rev. Billy Hester]: Thank you. You're a great host. Appreciate it.

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16:25:48:23 [Tom Kohler]: Close. Great. Wow. Well, Aaron Bucshbam story of course

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16:25:52:21 [Rev. Billy Hester]: Is, that's crazy. Yeah. Yeah. I didn't even know who he was until the house thing, man. Golly, he, wow. He

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16:26:01:10 [Tom Kohler]: Was one of the few that would stand. He really was.

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16:26:04:15 [Rev. Billy Hester]: Well, and you know who I love, who was a dear friend that I understand was one of his best friends was Bob Pattison. Oh yeah. They played tennis apparently together. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

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Billy Hester

16:26:14:18 [Tom Kohler]: We'll talk about interfaith.

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16:26:16:01 [Rev. Billy Hester]: Oh, oh yeah. Bob Jewish there. You Philip. Yeah, I exactly put on And they came to Epworth at one time, right? They came to Epworth. Yeah. It's crazy. And,

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16:26:25:05 [Tom Kohler]: And was a founding member. I mean, was like the, I mean, the best essence, the word was like a guiding angel in Weston Community Center.

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16:26:31:21 [Rev. Billy Hester]: I mean yeah, he he gave his whole life to there. Yeah. Yeah. He was there for years and years and years. I know. Amazing. He got it. He got it. He was a great mentor too. Yeah,

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16:26:43:16 [Tom Kohler]: That's a good way to say it.

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16:26:45:14 [Rev. Billy Hester]: Thank you, buddy. But I'm sorry you're having to do this all day. No, no, no. All of y'all. No.

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16:26:50:07 [Tom Kohler]: We've had some amazing stories that make you feel better about A lot of things. To be honest with you.

16:26:56:13 [Rev. Billy Hester]: I didn't tell you about Trump's parents being a member of my church, and Marla. Hello?