

VC: Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: And I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: We are honored to have as our guest today Rev. Adriene Thorne, Senior Minister at New York City's iconic Riverside Church. She is the first African American woman to hold this position. Rev. Thorne, welcome to the podcast, thanks for joining us.

AT: Thank you Vanessa, thank you Kathleen. I'm glad to be here.

VC: When Kathleen and I heard that you started your professional life as a dancer we were so interested to learn about your journey. As I understand it you were a Rockette at one time, is that right?

AT: I was, at the end of my career I was a Rockette. I did it sort of backwards. A lot of people join the line out of college, like when they're 18 or in their early 20s. I joined later in life and it was my last gig before I looked at going to seminary.

VC: So, tell us about that journey, how did all of that happen? (AT: The Rockette journey?) Well, from dancing to theology. How did that come about for you?

AT: Yeah, absolutely. I started dancing when I was seven. And I think the things that were connected for me with dance and the church, I was raised Catholic and the Catholic mass, if you've ever experienced it, it has a lot of pageantry. There's color, there's processional, it's very theatrical. I think church in general is theatrical. But I think the Catholic mass is particularly theatrical and there are rhythms to it, similar, I think, to theater and to being on stage and I don't think I put those things together when I was a little kid but I think they were working in me. I loved mass, I went to Catholic school from second through twelfth grade. I really loved being in those spaces. There is a... imaginative quality to mass I think as well. Church is always inviting people into a, the world as it should be and so that level of imagination, dreaming and hoping, leaning into something different I think also captured my attention. So I would bounce between mass and the dance studio where we were pretending to be snowflakes and fairies and live in another world and I think those things really came together for me and it seemed like a very clean and easy line to move from one into the other.

KK: That's a fascinating explanation. I also was brought up Catholic but I never thought of it quite that way. The only thing I used to feel was that it was safe (AT: Yes!), that it was a safe place to run away to. As the first African American woman to hold this position, an incredible position at Riverside Church and also the eighth Senior Minister, do you feel more pressured because you are a woman and the first woman at Riverside Church? Can you tell us if you feel you pressured to do better than anyone else?

AT: So, the first woman at Riverside Church was the Rev. Dr. Amy Butler, so I'm the second woman but the first African American woman. So I thought this was a really interesting question and I appreciate you asking it because it really made me stop and wrestle with some things that I really don't want to think about, because as you know, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was in this pulpit as well as the Rev. Dr. James A. Forbes who was named one of the top ten preachers in the nation. So there's a lot of pressure from a lot of different directions, one of the best preachers, considered one of the heroes of the civil rights movement, all of these people had been in this place and here comes Adriene Thorne. So yes, I do feel the pressure but at the same time I fight the pressure. I think the sense of urgency, the sense of pressure, the sense of excelling, being the best is death-dealing, I think, to women and I think particularly to African American people. I think in this society, because of what capitalism does to us, I think what white supremacy does to us is make us think our value comes in what we produce. Like do we produce children as enslaved Africans did? Do women produce children at all because in a lot of areas of our society our value is tied up in the children that we produce, but also in the labor that we produce. So there is a pressure to be the best, to not discredit my race or discredit my gender. And I think where I center myself is in my child of Godness, I center myself in my family and in my ancestors. But I think in particularly centering myself in my faith, what it says to me and what I hope it says for others is, we're already enough. We came with enough. We're made in the image of the most high God and we have nothing to prove. And I think that sort of fighting against this demand to be excellent, allows us to actually be excellent, to be creative and to let all of that pressure go. That's what I think about when I say I'm fighting against it, wanting to be who God created me to be.

VC: That sounds like it is also very liberating and in a way would free you to really go forward and go after what your goals are.

AT: Yes, Vanessa, and that can be some benefit of being an artist, because when we think about the artists who we really love, and I'm thinking of being in the dance studio and hearing directors say, "you've got the steps, you just have to go for it." (KK: Yes.) When I was at Radio City, I remember the director sitting me down, because I was one of the tallest Rockettes so I split the line. I was the center. And he said, "You've got the steps, but I just want you to go for it." And he's like, "If you make a mistake, just make a big mistake."

Well, you know the Rockettes don't make mistakes, right? (laughter) The whole game is about being perfect. But there was something so liberating in him saying "Just go for it, and make the mistake." And of course, I did it but there was something psychological about being given that permission and that freedom as you said. And that's what I think we're all looking for, for someone to say, you've got it, just go for it and if you make the mistake, make the mistake. It's not going to be the end of the world. The artists that we love, I think, live into that.

KK: I agree with you. My background is in music and I know a lot of the time I was listening too much, and trying to be perfect and not letting it go. And that is a gift, to be able to say no more, I'm letting it go, fine.

AT: Yeah.

VC: Now do you incorporate dance, or even just the arts in general, in your services?

AT: Absolutely. So, of course, there's lots of music and worship and we have an excellent, actually several excellent choirs, here at Riverside we have six choirs, but I certainly haven't gotten the congregation dancing in a formal way but we certainly move, we certainly do things that are "in body." So things that allow us to focus on what's happening internally for us, we hum together, we sing together, we sometimes get up and walk around in the sanctuary because there's a way I believe that people receive words when their bodies are moving, we often start sermons with stretching because I think it opens the heart space, I think it opens our body to receive and I don't think we always realize on a Sunday when we're sitting in the pew just how tight we've gotten over the week and so to raise our arms and turn our necks together, to breathe together, sometimes it's the first deep breath that people have taken all day, if not all week, and to do that in community and to acknowledge that we're doing it to be open to what the spirit is doing, I feel that all of that is some of the artistic, creative things that we try to bring to worship.

KK: You're calling that the in-body exercises.

AT: Yeah, it's like how do we live freedom in our body, how do we talk about the Exodus text, for example, where people are being liberated? If we're in these bodies and we're all tight and in pain... so for us to embody freedom and then to hear me talk about freedom, I think it lands differently for the congregation.

VC: Do you address the role of the arts in our daily lives in your ministry?

AT: I do. I think God is the first artist. It's one of the things I taught my child when they were first born, to walk through the neighborhood and notice all of the different ways that God is surprising us, whether it's the sun, the moon, those little snowbell flowers that come up through the snow in that space between winter and spring, but to invite that same sort of noticing and awe, childlike awe, is something that I encourage with the congregation. We also have partners who make it possible for our community to go and see shows, artistic, theatrical shows, dance performances, opera, and we then are able to gather as a community to talk about lament, or talk about current events or political issues. So we also use the arts to talk about challenging things, but also to talk about beauty and healing. So yes.

KK: That means there is a special relationship between you and the artists in your congregation. That's wonderful to see you blending the two together-it's so lovely.

AT: Thank you, thank you! Having been an artist myself, I think artists are some of the most spiritual people that I know. I don't think you sing the way artists can sing or move your body or create operas without a connection to something divine. And so to have that opportunity, especially now, to bring artists in to share their gifts with us, not just their theatrical gifts but their thoughts about how they created this thing I think is a wonderful opportunity to give platforms to artists.

KK: As Senior Minister, what are your goals? You seem to do so much. What do you see in the future?

AT: I think my goal in ministry always is to work for wholeness and healing in individuals and institutions, in systems and structures, and under that umbrella of wholeness and healing come a lot of things. So we're concerned about people being hungry and incarcerated, people being lonely and left out, not feeling a sense of belonging so a lot comes under that. In my tradition, Christian tradition, we think that the world is lost and broken, you know we just had a mass shooting in Monterey Park, California in the midst of this Lunar New Year. And there's something broken about a country, our country, that cannot address gun violence, and (KK: I agree) and weapons that are so destructive for people. So what does it mean for us to heal and make whole our country, our government that can't seem to get that right, that we can't seem to distribute wealth in a way that children have food to eat? So that's the over-arching goal, heal and to make whole individuals, institutions and systems.

VC: You were raised as a Catholic, right, you mentioned that, and over your career in theology you served at churches of various denominations, so can you talk a little bit about what your spiritual journey was like?

AT: Yes, so I love worship, whatever it looks like. Yes, I was raised Catholic, I went to Catholic school from 2nd through 12th grade, I considered becoming a nun, I think a lot of girls in those spaces, so around 8th grade... did you also, Kathleen?

KK: Well, of course, I was going to ask you that. It was either a nun or a singer. Those were my choices.

AT: That's so amazing. I thought, a nun or a dancer. I also thought about being a missionary. I just had such admiration for the sisters. They were very kind generally. There certainly were the terrorizing nuns that you imagine, the stereotype. But by and large the nuns were very kind. I was also just so impressed with the dedication with which they gave up their lives, many of them at very young ages, sixteen, seventeen years old, to commit to the church, so that was a very formative experience for me. But I have a dear friend who is a Buddhist monk, I met him at Thich Nhat Hanh's Monastery in the Southwest part of France. I've worshipped in Buddhist temples, Jewish synagogues, Muslim mosques. I've been a part of interfaith religious work here in New York City and so have colleagues who are Greek Orthodox. Probably any type of religion that you are familiar with, I know someone in that tradition or have worshipped in that space. I just am interested in the ways that people name God and shape ritual and find meaning in this human life. I find it all extraordinarily beautiful and I feel the spirit in all of it and I do not have a problem, I think being in space with other people. I don't feel threatened or like it's going to turn me, some of my ordaining mentors said, "Oh my goodness, be careful hanging out with the Buddhists," or "be careful spending too much time with this group or that group, they might 'turn' you". And I'm like, "As long as they're turning towards God, I think we're going to be OK."

KK: That's terrific. That's so great.

VC: Yeah, isn't that the universality of being spiritual?

AT: I think so. In seminary there was an imam who started a program—I went to the Pacific School of Religion and it's a part of a larger consortium so we were interacting with people from all different traditions. And he said, "Welcome. It's so wonderful that you've all made it here from all different directions, from all over the San Francisco Bay area." And he said, "This to me is what our search for God is like. We're all going up the mountain on different paths but we will all get to the top and there God will be." So just like getting into our cars and coming to this event, we're all going to make it. And I just thought, ah, that is such a beautiful metaphor...

KK: And it's so visual. I can see it when you said it. It's so visual. Now how, just listening to you, I would think all our listeners are going to run to see you at Riverside Church. How do you get young people into the church?

AT: Yes, that is a really wonderful question. You know, Pew Research does a lot of studies and I remember one that was held up, probably in the early 2000s that said they were very disgusted with the church, our hypocrisy, the fact for example that we sit on these huge endowments while people are hungry in the streets, and certainly the scandals that were happening that harmed children and vulnerable people, sexual scandals in all denominations. I think we focus a lot on the Catholics but to be honest this is happening in all traditions, all faith traditions. And I think the hypocrisy bothers them. I know the hypocrisy bothers them. I think the fact that we're not welcoming of their friends who are different faith traditions and that we're not welcoming of the LGBTQ+ community. Those three things are huge red flags I think for young people. So what do I do? I think we want to have authentic conversations. I think our young millennials, my kid is a zoomer, Generation Z, they call them Generation Zoom as well, they want to have authentic conversations. I think when they say to us, "I just don't believe" or "This doesn't make sense to me," I don't think they want us to try to convince them. They want us to listen, to take what they say seriously, ask them how we might do it differently, what would be meaningful for you. And what I've learned from young people that I think is appealing is acknowledging that the church of my parents, the church of the 40s and the 50s, I think that church is largely over. I think it has at least shifted. I think our willingness to engage and be in community with young people who may never come and sit in the pews is a mind shift that many of us are not ready or willing to make, but it's the reality. We have to, I think as a church, understand that our community is way beyond our walls, it's outside our doors, it's in service, a lot of our young adults want to be in service. They want to be making a difference in the world, changing the world, but they may not come to Sunday worship. But if they do, when they do I think they want to see us wrestling with some of these big issues. Why do we have so much money when people are hungry? Whose land was this church built on? How was the money that sits in our endowment made? Who was harmed in the making of this money? They want us to have honest, difficult conversations and I think that is attractive to them. And as frightening as it is I think it is also attractive to older members as well.

VC: Building on that, how do you see the role of the church, or spiritual life, even, in today's world, how can the church be relevant and address as you say, current issues like homelessness, climate change, gun violence, etc., etc.?

AT: Yeah, so I think a church like Riverside Church, and we have other churches in New York City that are similar who are these big cathedrals need to be having conversations about our money and our endowments and

our buildings. What are the ways that we can leverage those things, that power, that agency, those connections, for good? These are difficult conversations. We certainly do the things that you would expect a church to do. We have a food pantry, we have a clothing closet, we have a prison ministry. But the deeper conversation I think is around advocacy. We certainly do advocacy as well. But I think those are the things that churches need to be leaning into. Meaning, Martin Luther King said, when the good Samaritan was on the Jericho road, it's wonderful that the Samaritan stopped to help the traveler who was attacked by thieves. But the issue is why does that road attract thieves? What do we do about the Jericho road to make it safe? That is the work that I think the church needs to be focusing on with greater energy with its money and its connections. We don't want to have to continue giving people bags of food. Our pantry is open Monday through Thursday and they certainly need the food and we will give it while the need is there, but we want to work ourselves out of business. We have a shelter but we don't want to maintain a shelter. We want people to have their own housing. We are visiting those who are imprisoned and that will probably be an ongoing need for the church but we want to reduce the number of people that are in prison. We want them back in their communities. So that is the work of a lifetime and I think the charity work that we do, giving groceries, visiting the imprisoned, is important work but I think the long-term difficult work, maybe the work that doesn't make us feel as good because it takes such a long time to accomplish is the work that we really need to be leaning in in this moment.

VC: Going back to the topic of attracting young people and keeping them, I read on your website there is a Beyonce mass. Can you talk about that a little bit, is that... are you going to, or have you, have that at your church? And are there other sort of more pop oriented services that you might do?

AT: Yes, thank you for bringing that up. So the Beyonce Mass was originated by the Rev. Dr. Yolanda Norton. It came out of a class she taught called Beyonce and the Hebrew Bible. You may be thinking, how is there a connection at all between Beyonce and the Hebrew Bible? And it's quite stunning what she has done. This Mass deals a lot with identity and belonging, and it really appeals to folk who have been hurt by the church and have said they're never going back. LGBTQ+ community, Queer community who feel there's no place for them and Black women and women of color and culture. Beyonce, I am not as familiar with her music as Dr. Norton is, but we did have the mass at my last church and we are bringing it to Riverside on September 29th. We happen to be neighbors with Columbia University, Barnard College, Jewish Theological, so many young people here who as you might imagine are disaffected with religion. I think what this offering does is invite people to think about their child of God-ness. What is fabulous about you that the world may not see in your queerness, your femaleness, in your, just who you are as a child of God? And I think young people will find it attractive. When we did it at my church in Brooklyn there were actually a lot of middle aged and older people,

people in their 60s to 80s who came as well. And there were a lot of tears because there is a song that she sings and it has something to do with beauty and there's a ritual in the mass where a mirror is held up so people come for communion but they also come to the mirror and the person holding the mirror says over them something like "you are fearfully and wonderfully made." And people are just sobbing because I think we forget how perfect we are and how beautiful we are. And to have people look at themselves in the mirror while they're being blessed with those words, it just changes people's lives. I think it reminds them that they are made in the image of God.

KK: That is so amazing. I can understand them crying. So few people tell other people that they're beautiful just the way they are.

AT: Yes, yes. But Beyonce does. I'm learning that in her music many of her songs are anthems for Queer community, for women, for women with larger bodies, I think this is also an issue, you've got women like Beyonce who sometimes think they're not beautiful—it's like, come on, Beyonce? But other women—looking at what Lizzo is doing. There is a spirituality and a holiness to what she is doing while reclaiming the beauty and the honor and celebration of her body that I think is giving so many women, and, not just women, people in general, the right and the courage to say, I love my body. (KK: Yes, yes).

VC: So would you do a Lizzo service?

27:15 AT: Oh my goodness, I would love to have Lizzo here! I don't know if the trustees of the church would love to have Lizzo here because she certainly pushes some envelopes but Jesus (KK: Oh, yes) pushed envelopes but my goodness, to have Lizzo here... If you've ever watched her songs or heard her talk when people are attacking her, it is sermonic, she really does get right at the heart of her holiness and her child of God-ness which really invites others to do the same. I just think she is a tremendous gift to us in these times.

27:50 KK: She's so secure within herself and so many people aren't, so that is important, and then you have to think about why there are some children that grow, are secure in who they are while others don't. (AT: Yes, yes) And that's a major problem. I'm sure you address that as you're saying. What is the most challenging aspect of this job?

28:15 AT: Of this job here at Riverside Church? (KK: Yeah). It's a complicated institution. The church in general is complicated. Riverside I think is complicated because of the legacy. We're about 92 years old, it's a huge building, it's a huge staff, a huge budget, everything is multiplied I think because of the enormity of the

institution. So what do I do? I think similar to the question you asked about the pressure, I kind of have to put that to the side, the hugeness of it, and be reminded that as you were saying just a moment ago, everyone wants to know they are beloved of God. That's basic, that's simple, no matter how large the congregation is, how large the budget is, what can I do? What can I lead? How can I serve in a way that lets every person who considers themselves a member of this community feel that they are God's beloved? So I think that becomes the challenge, how to sort of bring down the grandiosity, the gravity of The Riverside Church so that people feel seen and loved. Because I think in that seeing and loving is where our healing and our wholeness comes from that allows us to be the Riverside Church that everyone is thinking about or imagining, remembering, and to do the great thing that God has called us to do.

29:48 VC: So to make it really relevant and accessible for the people. And how about the most rewarding part of this job?

30:04 AT: I think the most rewarding part of ministry regardless of where I have ever served is always the people. It's always, always, always the congregation. Every congregation that I have served has just been filled with amazing people. We live in a tremendous city. New York City is amazing. But I have visited churches outside of the city and certainly the church I grew up in, in Prince Georges County, Maryland, the people are amazing. When you get to know folks' stories, when you know Miss Katherine makes this amazing kale salad, you know their children, you've baptized them, you've sat with their parents as they are transitioning, that's the gift of this work, it is always the gift of this work is the people. Their stories, their journeys, the trust that they will put in you, to hold those stories, because they're so valuable. So for me that's always the joy, that will always be the answer. No matter where I am it's the people.

31:18 KK: I think they are so lucky to have you, because you're right, it's not a little church in a little town where you would know everybody that comes but yet you do because you open yourself to that.

31:33 AT: Right. I think, Kathleen, that's the... this is my theater background... like, that's the gig, that's the job. People come to church because they want to be seen and loved and to feel a sense of belonging. So to the extent that I can, I'm really good with names. I want to know people's names, I want to know their stories...

31:56 VC: That's a great skill, remembering people's names. Absolutely.

32:03 AT: Right, they want to feel listened to. And I know that in a church like this it's very easy for someone who sits in my chair, almost because of the definition of the job you are very removed from the people. But the

reality is I see people every Sunday. I preach and then I am at the door shaking hands. And I want to be able to say, “Kathleen, it’s so good to see you.” I want to be able to say, “Vanessa, thank you for coming back this Sunday.” If you’ve told me something that mattered, like on day one lady said, “my son will be here to celebrate the Lunar New Year with me,” and I said to her, “Where’s your son? I don’t see him.” And she said, “oh, that’s my nephew” And I said, “oh, sorry.” And he was here, but he had to leave to take his child to band practice. That matters to people. We want to be remembered because it says something about community. So even in this enormous church we want to communicate that we see our people and they’re not just strangers.

33:08 VC: So what are your hopes for the future as we go forward?

33:15 AT: My hopes for the future of Riverside Church. We are stunningly—I’ve been here four months and we have made already some shifts in culture and shifts in the way that we do what we do. So things are becoming more collaborative. I feel like there’s so much joy in the place which is such a gift after a season of tears. With Covid, I think with things that are happening in our government, but also just things that were happening here at the church, so much transition and so much upheaval, to be in spaces where we’re laughing, breathing and stretching together and enjoying the children and what they bring to our community, I think my hope is for more of that, because it’s healing, it’s healing for us to laugh together, to break bread together, to be silly together especially after such a long season of lament.

34:17 KK: Well, Vanessa and I are coming to Riverside Church.

34:21 VC: We will be there! I’m telling you and I hope that our listeners also will be attending. You really made it come alive and be real for us (AT Thank you so much) and I think that’s really wonderful. (34:43) So last but certainly not least, I know you mentioned the church has many resources to help the community. You mentioned the food pantry and the clothing drive. Maybe talk about some of the resources the church has available to the community and how people can find out more about them.

35:11 AT: Yes, so the first place to find out about resources is, I would send you to our website, trenyc.org. If you look at life of the community you will learn about many things that are happening in the immediate future. One of the things that is top of mind for me right now, we have a weekday school. It is a school that exists to educate children to change the world. It’s a nursery school, so we have children as young as one in our Side by Side program and they go up to five. These types of schools are disappearing, I think with the advent of universal pre-k. But what our weekday school also offers is space for children who may have special needs. So it’s a wonderful gift, I think, to the community here at Columbia University as well as Barnard College.

Broadway families enroll their children here, and we have room. So it's a wonderful resource if that's a need for families. Of course our food pantry Monday through Thursday is open. It's a client choice pantry so we don't just hand you a bag of groceries. Our clients are able to go in and select the things they would like. Our clothing closet is also open at that same time frame. We had a shower program but I'm not sure that that has reopened since Covid but check the website. We have a barber training program that is coming back, and that is for folks in the community who are looking for employment. Training as a barber is a very good skill to have and then we support the graduates in becoming entrepreneurs. I'm sure there are things I'm forgetting, but if you are interested in the work of love and justice, we have an anti-racism task force, our Maranatha group does LGBTQ+ justice work, our Beloved Earth community does things around climate justice. There are 14 justice ministries here at Riverside Church so if you're interested in getting involved, we do advocacy in Albany, partner with the Children's Defense Fund around work on behalf of the rights of children. Please just check out the website and see how you might get involved. We would love to have your support either in our work of love, justice or in worship and you're welcome to be here even if you're not sitting in the pews.

37:44 VC: Oh, this is fantastic. Thank you so much for this wonderful interview. It's truly inspirational.

37:54 KK: Absolutely. This is exciting and I can't wait to see you in person.

38:01 AT: Yes, I can't wait to see you both in person either. We look forward to welcoming you.

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