

## ELIZABETH FELICETTI: UNEXPECTED ABUNDANCE (TRANSCRIPT)

### NOVEMBER 7, 2023

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0:00 Hello, everyone and welcome to the Women's Scholars and Professionals podcast.

0:05 My name is Anne Boyd and I'll be your host.

0:13 We at Women Scholars and Professionals are here to support women in their God-given callings into the university and beyond.

0:20 So if you're a graduate student or a faculty member, an administrator or a student in professional school, a scholar in between jobs or simply a person who supports women in the academic world.

0:33 Then this podcast is for you.

0:37 What does it look like to live a rich and generative life as a woman without children?

0:43 The Reverend Elizabeth Felicetti joined us on the podcast to explore this question and talk about some of the 25 women she has written about in her book, *Unexpected Abundance, The Fruitful Lives Of Women Without Children*.

1:00 Elizabeth shares from her own personal experience of life as a barren woman, a term which you'll hear her reclaim in a beautifully positive way.

1:11 She weaves her own story, including an ongoing fight against cancer into the book.

1:17 As she highlights strong and refreshing examples of childless women throughout scripture history and our present day.

1:26 I especially loved Elizabeth's emphasis on the partnership of women and her urging that women support one another regardless of maternal status.

1:37 It's a delightful conversation.

1:39 And if you listen to the end, I've included an excerpt in which Elizabeth reveals a bit more about her journey through cancer treatments while she was completing her M.F.A.

1:49 So let me tell you a little bit more about her.

1:54 Elizabeth Felicetti is an Episcopal priest and the rector of Saint David's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia.

2:02 She earned a Master of Fine Arts in Writing from Spalding University in Louisville, Kentucky, where she studied creative non-fiction and poetry.

2:12 Elizabeth also holds a Master of Divinity from Virginia Theological Seminary where she loved studying Old Testament and Biblical Hebrew and spent part of one summer in Sudan, teaching Hebrew to Episcopal priests.

2:28 Her writing has appeared in the *Atlantic Christian Century* and numerous other magazines when not actively serving Saint David's or writing.

2:37 Elizabeth loves birding and playing the ukulele.

2:41 So let's dive right in.

2:43 We're so glad you're here.

2:48 I really want to talk about your book *Unexpected Abundance*.

2:52 But first, I would love to spend a few minutes hearing about your calling into ministry and your career in writing.

3:00 And I think you know that our listeners are mostly women who are connected with academic life in one way or another.

3:06 So I'm interested in spending a few minutes just talking about your training and your sense of calling.

3:12 So can you tell us about your path into ministry?

3:16 You do touch on this story in the book, but I'd love for the listeners to hear it.

3:19 Oh, I'd love to thank you for asking me.

3:22 I've wanted to be a writer my entire life and my undergraduate degree was in creative writing.

3:29And when I was married, my husband offered to pay the bills for a while so that I could try writing full time.

3:37And I was trying to write a novel based on a colonial Anglican church.

3:45And I had the, the protagonist was a minister's wife.

3:50And I wondered what would happen to a minister's wife if the minister died because then she would no longer have a home.

3:59And at that time, at least in Virginia, there were glebe attached to churches, which is a, a farm, which was how the family would then be able to support themselves.

4:10But the more I started studying colonial church history in the Episcopal church.

4:19And also the more I studied the Bible, I relayed a story in the book about one Sunday when we accidentally read Psalm 109 responsibly in church, the more I realized that I was more interested in ordination than actually writing that novel.

4:38So that led to discernment.

4:40And ultimately, my obtaining a Masters of Divinity degree.

4:46And at first I thought I just wanted to do this to delve more deeply into the Bible.

4:51But I began to realize that my attraction to a minister's wife actually was a longing for sacramental ministry.

4:59Wow.

5:00Yeah.

5:01So what have been for you?

5:03Some of the gifts of life in ministry and some of the challenges too, especially as a woman, the gifts I think the biggest gift for me has been being able to be with people at some of the most precious moments in their life such as births.

5:21I have often been able to meet just brand new babies at the same time that you know, people besides the mother and father are, are meeting them.

5:32I've baptisms are my favorite thing in the world weddings.

5:39and it's also very precious being with people during difficult times like funerals.

5:45Some of the challenges for me lately, I did mention in the book that I've had some struggle with cancer and I have found that that has made pastoral care a little bit more difficult for me because I'm having more trouble separating myself from what people are going through and a pastor needs to have some necessary distance and understand that this is happening to someone else, not to yourself.

6:13But I have found that especially with loved ones of people who are sick I worry about is is that going to be my my husband sometime soon?

6:22So that that has certainly been a challenge and in the episcopal church being a woman in ministry, it, it's certainly not a problem for me at my current church where I'm the director.

6:37I think that people who have a problem with women in ministry are not going to be coming through my doors.

6:43But when I was an associate, the 1st 3.5 years that I was ordained, I worked underneath a male rector.

6:51And so there were people, not many, but, you know, there were people who didn't want to take communion from me or even really speak to me and that was that was challenging.

7:07Yeah.

7:07Yeah.

7:08I mean, it seems like with both of those challenges that you like, one of the, the skills that a minister needs is to be able to differentiate yourself from the people you're serving and kind of just which is a skill that I think we, we all need as we interact.

7:29I mean, even just driving down the street and encountering people in traffic, it can be, it's easy to take things personally very much.

7:37And i it's a skill that I thought that I had but after having cancer myself and very serious cancer and then I, since the book have had a recurrence, it's become much more challenging.

7:50 So in the midst of going through it myself, I'm really struggling a bit with that necessary differentiation.

7:57 Yeah.

7:58 Yeah.

7:59 Hopefully that wasn't too honest.

8:01 No, I think that's, I mean, that's very, it's relatable, it's vulnerable.

8:06 That's, you know, I'm, I'm grateful that you shared that.

8:09 Thank you.

8:10 Thank you.

8:11 Well, we've started to talk just a little bit about your book, but let's talk more.

8:16 It is.

8:17 It's a beautiful book.

8:18 It's entitled Unexpected Abundance, The Fruitful Lives Of Women Without Children.

8:24 And this book when I read it, I just really enjoyed it.

8:27 It was fascinating and you're so winsome in it.

8:30 You really, you weave stories from your own life into it.

8:35 As you describe these 25 women from history who lived full and generative lives without Children.

8:42 So I want to start in the preface, you described the reason you wanted to write this book.

8:48 Can you, can you share that with the listeners?

8:50 Sure.

8:51 My husband and I wanted to have Children.

8:54 We've been married now 27 years and we were unable to have them.

8:59 And I noticed that most of the resources I was turning to at the time seem to result in a child that it was what we had a terrible time with infertility.

9:11 But then, you know, God gave us this baby or we adopted a baby.

9:18 And I, I really wanted a story with a happy ending that wasn't a child.

9:24 So I think for the most part, I set out to write the book that I wished that I would have had 20 years ago when I was really struggling with this.

9:33 Yeah, I think it, it makes sense and I agree that I haven't seen a lot of books.

9:39 that, that take this perspective, which I think is really fascinating and beautiful.

9:44 And you start by talking about the concept of barrenness and you connect it to the beauty of the desert.

9:53 I would love for you to describe that a little bit too.

9:55 Thank you.

9:57 We most people tend to associate the word barren as something very negative.

10:04 But I grew up in Phoenix, Arizona.

10:08 I went to college in Tucson, Arizona and I spent many summers in Prescott Arizona, all of which are part of the desert landscape.

10:18 I'm now living in Virginia, which is very green and I'm in the Richmond area.

10:24 I think we get about 45 inches of rain a year versus Phoenix, which gets about eight.

10:30 Right?

10:31 Wow.

10:32 And so life looks different in the desert, but there is still abundant life.

10:37 There are swirls and hula monsters, all sorts of beautiful colors, but it's different.

10:44 It's different than it is in lush green Virginia.

10:48 And that's what I believe with families with and without Children that both can be beautiful and fruitful and rich, but they do look different.

11:00 It's a different kind of beauty.

11:01 So that was like for me, that was an effective metaphor.

11:06 Yeah.

11:06 Yeah.

11:07 And that, that was very effective for me too.

11:09 And you then explore really the meat of your book is exploring these 25 women that you found that the stories of whom you found.

11:21 And they did not write raise Children and you pull them from scripture and history and you kind of cover everything from music to activism, to medicine.

11:31 And I'm curious to know how you decided on these 25 women.

11:35 What, what characteristics were you looking for in their lives?

11:39 Well, thank you for that question.

11:41 I do just want to name that.

11:43 I know it is, it is not a comprehensive list.

11:46 I think for example of your a your audience of women scholars and, and academics, I don't have a chapter specifically for academics, although there are some who I think would fit that mold.

12:01 I, I don't have a chapter about business women.

12:03 I mean, there are so many things that I missed.

12:05 So it really reflects the categories, reflect my own interest.

12:10 But what was essential to me was besides not having Children was that they were women of faith because I do think that the judeo-christian tradition really has emphasized motherhood for women and I wanted to explore, yeah, I consider myself a faithful person.

12:32 I wasn't able to have Children and I want to explore what are ways that I can be fruitful and live into God's call for me without bearing Children or, or raising Children of my own.

12:46 Yeah.

12:46 So those were so those were the, the two main things and then the the categories just reflect my own interests.

12:54 And there were fabulous women whom I did not end up using in the book such as Frida Kahlo, for example, because she seemed to, you know, in some, she often spoke negatively about faith.

13:08 And so that just was not what I was trying to get across in the book, even though I respect her very much and admire her art very much.

13:17 Yeah.

13:18 Well, and you, the examples you chose, you really draw out just interesting aspects of their lives that, you know, even if we have heard of them before, often, you don't think about them in the context of this, of this idea of like women without Children and how they live their lives.

13:37 So I would love to dive into a few of these.

13:41 You, you have a several from scripture and I really was compelled by the story of Esther, which of course, I know and you point out rightly that it's a surprisingly sexy story.

13:54 I hadn't really thought about that in that context before.

13:58 But then you, you leave kind of after you explore that, you leave the reader with a reflection on the power that comes with making active choices instead of just waiting around it.

14:11 I'd love for you to say more about this.

14:14 Even though God is not explicitly mentioned in Esther, I believe that Esther was very much responding to a call from God when her cousin Mordecai said to her, who knows?

14:27 But you may have come into royal dignity for just such a time as this.

14:31 And you know, my reading of the story.

14:35 I believe that Esther was terrified.

14:38I, you know, she had originally was saying, I, you know, I can't go before the king.

14:44He hasn't called me for a long time.

14:47She knows, that she, you know, it could cost her her life if she goes before the king unbidden, if he decides that he doesn't want to see her.

14:58But she did respond after, you know, fasting.

15:04which, yeah, I, I read as fasting and prayer.

15:07She responded to this call and then did decide to make this very bold move.

15:14So I see it very much as a story of discernment and call and she ends up saving her people and being incredibly generative even though yeah, as far as we know, she didn't have Children, she may have had them after the story, but scripture does not indicate that she didn't.

15:35Yeah.

15:35Yeah.

15:39You write about Mary and Martha, which is you know, there's, there's a lot about them in scripture, but you focus this one, you know, at this one point on the classic story from Luke 10 where Mary is receiving Jesus's teaching and Martha is distracted by many things.

15:57And I really love the way you point out here and in some of the other texts in scripture that there is an appearance of competition between these women, but that it doesn't need to be that way.

16:07So what can we learn from scripture about how can we partner together as women rather than competing?

16:15Well, I think with Mary and Martha, I, I struggle to stay within that particular story.

16:22I think that Jesus offers a way of telling Martha that he wishes she would be less distracted.

16:31I but I also, my sister was very shocked in the book by my comment that I said, it sounded like Jesus had been handing, had been having women hand, his had food to him for his entire life.

16:42And my sister said, are you sure you really want to say that that you know, she found that very shocking.

16:47But later in John, we hear about, you know, Martha going out to greet Jesus when he has come to them after Lazarus has died and she essentially challenges him and he listens to that, he comforts her.

17:06And I think that shows his deep respect and Mary later anoints Jesus.

17:13And so I, I think that those stories show these two sisters working together or I I also think about Rachel and Leah who are certainly sisters whom we might often think of as in competition, especially since they were co wives of Jacob.

17:31But when Jacob consults them about leaving their father Laban, they scripture has some saying together that yes, they want to do that.

17:43You know, so they, they claim some agency and they are working together.

17:47So I do think we do have examples of women working together, including Mary and Martha.

17:53Although that particular story is a challenging one for me.

17:57But when I preach it, I try to talk about this distractions versus, you know, doing the dishes because someone does need to do the dishes.

18:06And I do wish that Jesus and the disciples had helped with that.

18:09And maybe they did, maybe Mary Martha sat down and they all listened and then they all did the dishes together.

18:16I that is what I wish.

18:19Well, let's continue.

18:21So you you write about Queen Elizabeth the first, which it was very illuminating.

18:27I don't often think about her.

18:28I mean, it, I mean, I think of her as a person in history but not so much about her faith.

18:34but you, you talk about her faith and you help the reader to understand what a really radical choice she made in refusing marriage and Children.

18:42And I love this, this little anecdote that she even became so fatigued with the discussion of succession that she made mention of it illegal.

18:53And then you go on to describe a connection you sensed between her focus on the present moment and your own experience of living through cancer treatments.

19:04So I would love for you to say more about that connection.

19:07Well, thank you.

19:08I, I do just want to say that for me, Queen Elizabeth is her faith is more closely tied to my own tradition in the Anglican church.

19:18Because she is the one who had said, you know, I'm not going to peer into your soul to look at what you believe, but we're all going to worship the same way.

19:26So, you know, the Elizabethan settlement was very fundamental to the Anglican Church.

19:31So that's probably why she came to my mind so easily when thinking about her faith.

19:37But as far as living in the present, yeah, people during her time seem to be so concerned about what was going to happen to the kingdom when she died without a biological child that they, that they were not paying enough attention to the way that she was actually running the kingdom when she was alive.

20:00So she was trying to get them to focus on the present and with cancer, that has certainly been a spiritual challenge for me.

20:10I've since had a cancer.

20:13I've had a cancer recurrence since the book was turned in.

20:18And my, you know, statistically, my odds of being alive in five years are not very good.

20:25So it's important to me to embrace the time that I have.

20:30You know, like right now I feel good.

20:32I'm, I'm talking to you, I'm back working at my church and I'm trying to embrace that time and live with it day by day.

20:42And I think that if I, I had Children that would be difficult, it would be difficult not to think about what is life going to be like for them without their mother, especially because my mother died when I was six.

20:55So I very much know,, what it can be like to be a, a motherless child.

21:02So that was a, a connection that, that I made that I'm, that, I'm glad you at least did not find a ludicrous connection.

21:11No, I like, I, I really appreciated it.

21:14and I think, I mean, I think we all need to, we would all do well to pay attention to the present moment more than we do rather than getting stuck in our heads.

21:26But it is so difficult.

21:28So, in, in your experience, have you found any practices that help you to kind of ground yourself?

21:34You know, when I don't know why, I guess I find myself sometimes just kind of spinning, you know, mentally or worrying about things.

21:43Do you have any practices that help you?

21:46Well, in the Episcopal church, you know, we have the, the daily offices and I have found, I love listening to morning prayer on an app when I'm taking my morning walk.

22:00And since it's, you know, it's daily prayers, so it helps to ground me in the day.

22:04It helps to ground me in scripture.

22:07The movement is helpful.

22:09So that is, that's a daily practice that I think helps me to focus just on the day and to, and to start out my day.

22:18Well, especially this time of year when it's dark when I'm first listening to it.

22:22And then once I've listened to morning prayer, then I can listen to podcasts like yours.

22:26But I don't start with, with morning prayer.

22:30That's great.

22:31Can, can I ask what app you use?

22:34Yes, it's the Forward Movement Daily Prayer app Super.

22:39I'll put a link to that in the show notes so that people can find it.

22:42Thank you.

22:43Well, I want to ask about one more.

22:47I can't resist asking about what is I think the most unlikely pairing in your book?

22:52You talk about Dolly Parton and Hil Hildegard of Bingen.

22:57They share space in your chapter on composers.

23:00So tell us about the similarities you saw in their journeys and how you decided to, to connect those two.

23:07That was actually my most fun pairing.

23:11So I'm thrilled that you, that you brought that up.

23:15I found that both women were sometimes dismissed by contemporaries, not only because of their gender, but also because of appearances or if not dismissed because of appearances, certainly judged on their appearance.

23:34I know that when I was growing up, I often heard more about Dolly Parton's figure than I did her music when she is a prolific composer who's written more than 3000 songs and, and, and yet people talk about her, you know, her hair or her body and then with the hair hil of binging her.

24:01the women in her nunnery sang with their hair loose, which was something that some of her contemporaries were very judgmental about and said, you know, nuns shouldn't be doing that.

24:13And Hildegard responded, you know, this is an acceptable hairstyle for virgins and this is, this is what we do.

24:20So both of them refused to be defined by these judgments on their opinions.

24:28And instead, you know, just moved forward with their ministry and with Dolly Parton, I just especially want to lift up her literacy program, which is amazing.

24:41And she also contributed money to vaccinations, which helped lead to the Dana vaccination.

24:48So both of them, besides their music contributed wonderful things to humankind.

24:57you know, certainly despite their gender and they refused to be defined by their appearance.

25:03Yeah.

25:03Yeah.

25:07You know, we, we often get questions from women in our community who don't have Children either by choice or by circumstance and they're wrestling with the pressures that accompany this experience, which you have certainly written about in this book.

25:23So what encouragement might you offer to a woman like this who's listening to this conversation right now?

25:29Well, women like this are my primary reason for writing this book because I wish that I had had this book when I was struggling with that myself.

25:42But I do want to lift up that there is hope and there is fruit and there is life whether or not we one day have have Children.

25:53And that I hope that in looking at these 25 women, that people might be encouraged and inspired and realize what abundance there is out there.

26:05And I, you know, the original title that I had for the book was Blessed Are The Baron, The Fruits of infertility.

26:13And Erdman said to me, you know, you, you address the book really to women without Children by or not by choice.

26:22And if we title it that way, I think that it will, the people who chose not to have Children will think this book is not for them.

26:31And so they came up with the title that I absolutely love.

26:35And I think was better than my first choice, even though, you know, I wanted to get a little Jesus quote right on the, the title.

26:42But I think that there's a lot from Jesus in, in any way.

26:46So, yeah.

26:46Oh, absolutely.

26:48Well, I do like both of those titles, but it is true that the one you have now is more inclusive and, and, and it is, it is a lovely title.

26:56Well, and as you say, this book is really intended for women who do not have Children, but also for those who do so what messages do you hope to convey to these two groups?

27:07And how can, how can they support one another?

27:11How can, how can that that sense of community be bolstered?

27:17I believe that the best way to understand and support each other is through deep listening.

27:26And one way that I believe God has, has blessed me is with a, a friendship that I made just a couple of months into my ordination.

27:37I became very close friends with a woman who had four Children and she had put aside her own professional desires while raising her Children and the youngest ones were just starting high school.

27:55And so she was then seeking work inside the church.

27:59And she had also completed a year of seminary on the West Coast before moving to Virginia.

28:06And I think that through our years of friendship and years of talking and listening to each other, we were both able to see a little bit of the road not taken that, you know, I I acknowledge that she has some wonderful gifts that I do not.

28:24I love her Children.

28:26You know, and Children were something that I wanted.

28:29She had had interest in ordination.

28:32That's an, that's something that did not end up happening for her.

28:37But I think that we could see in each other's experiences, the gifts as well as the challenges and come to appreciate our own lives while also honoring the others life.

28:50And that's what I really want for women is I, I don't want those of us without Children to think that women with Children are unable to achieve any of the things that, that we are trying to achieve.

29:05And I also would hope that women with Children would not look on those of us without Children as missing out on an essential human experience.

29:17Yeah.

29:18Yeah.

29:19Well, I love the way this book really, it kind of opens up that conversation in a new way.

29:26And I think I really hope our, our listeners pick up a copy to read it.

29:30It's, it was a joy.

29:32Thank you And thank you for acknowledging that.

29:35I, that while I primarily had women without Children in mind, I really believe that this is a book for women with Children as well.

29:42And so I hope that people won't think that I'm not speaking to them because they are mothers.

29:48Yeah.

29:49Yeah, absolutely.

29:51Well, it's been so this has been such a delightful conversation.

29:55I and I know that readers will be interested to know how to follow you and your work and what's on the horizon.

30:03The, the easiest way to follow me would be through my website.

30:07Although my last name is hard to spell, but it's Elizabeth Felicetti dot com.



30:12F as in Frank Ellicetti, I told you before we started, my last name needs to be Marshall and that was much easier to spell.

30:21But if you, if you go to my website, you can find my newsletter, you can find out where to find me on social media as well as links to my book and I do have three more books.

30:37Coming out, one is co-authored by Samantha Vincent Alexander, who's a close friend of mine, who in 2022 ended up having a, a very serious bout with Mesa and she called me from the ICU and said, how did you pray when you were in the ICU?

31:00And this opened up a, a conversation for us as episcopal priest that we had certainly been with people in the hospital and people in grave distress many times.

31:13But we were finding that the resources we had were not necessarily working.

31:18And so we wrote a book of very honest prayers.

31:23Many of them are laments and some of them are, but you know, a bit humorous, but they are called irreverent prayers on talking to God when you're seriously sick.

31:35So that was a joy to work with someone else.

31:39And then I just recently signed with Erdman for two more books that I'm in the process of writing.

31:44One of them is a, a memoir about my experience with, with cancer as well as the warriors narrative that often accompanies that that often I find Christians are uncomfortable with with the idea of, of war.

32:03when Jesus, you know, seems to have been much more of a, of a pacifist.

32:08So I'm trying to look at that narrative.

32:11And then I also am working on devotional about John, the Baptist who is probably my favorite biblical character after Jesus.

32:20And I'm, I'm really excited that they said yes to this.

32:23I have a, well, your listeners can't see this but I have a John the Baptist Nutcracker.

32:29I'm, I'm a huge fan girl and I'm thrilled that I'm going to get to, to write about him.

32:41I love the way Elizabeth's book, Accompanies Women through the experience of not having Children while also encouraging them and all of us to rethink our understanding of a meaningful life.

32:53Her writing is deep and also whimsical at times.

32:57Case in point, check out the show notes at the well, for a photo of that John the Baptist Nutcracker.

33:03It's amazing.

33:05I hope you take a look at Elizabeth's writings and consider signing up for her newsletter.

33:11Those links are in the show notes as well and if you listen to the end of the credits, you'll get to hear a bonus from our podcast where Elizabeth reveals a bit more about her journey through cancer treatments while she was completing her mfa the Women's scholars and Professionals podcast is hosted by me, Anne Boyd and is a production of intervarsity Christian Fellowship.

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34:10And as we close, listen in on this excerpt from my conversation with Elizabeth, it was that part was a little bit heartbreaking.

34:21Actually, I, my Mfa was a brief residency program.

34:26So I took four years to complete it and I took it as sort of a piecemeal sabbatical from my church.

34:36So I would go away for 10 days for the residency and then I would take a certain number of days off a year to complete the, the independent work.

34:45So it took me four years to complete, but I was supposed to have my graduation residency in May of 2020.

34:54And, you know, so first it they made it virtual.

34:58But then also I ended up, you know, I, I was originally diagnosed with breast cancer and while being treated for that, they accidentally discovered lung cancer, which shocked me because I've, I've never been a smoker.

35:11I didn't have any reason to believe that I would have it.

35:16And so if I hadn't been receiving this treatment, you know, I may not be alive right now, but I had to have part of my lung taken out and then I had to start chemotherapy.

35:30And so I wasn't a, I wasn't able to attend that residency, so I had to push that down the line.

35:38And I, I did end up finishing and graduating in November of 2020.

35:44But so what I would, what I would love to recommend for women who are undergoing something similar is I, I recommend staying ambitious but allowing maybe a slower pace that things did not happen, As quickly as I wanted them to, but they did happen.

36:08And I'm thrilled to, to have that degree.

36:12And, and I love that, it helps me to prioritize my writing, which now is, is bearing a lot of fruit.