

FamilyLife Blended®

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Season 1, Episode 11: Undone: Making Peace With the Life You Have

Guest: Michele Cushatt

Air Date: June 3, 2019

Michele: The point where God met humanity in the closest place was at the cross. The place where God came and connected with His people at the very closest moment was at the foot of the cross, in other words in the place of suffering. So very literally, God was where the pain is and He *still* is.

Ron: From the FamilyLife® Podcast Network this is *FamilyLife Blended*. I'm Ron Deal. This podcast brings together timeless wisdom and practical help and hope to blended families and those who love them.

If you have ever felt pain in your life and wondered if God was there, you'll want to hear Michele Cushatt's story. And if you've ever found yourself discouraged with your blended family, you'll want to hear what Michele did when she felt discouraged and lost.

Michele Cushatt is a highly sought after conference speaker and author who shares about the intersection of faith and life, real life. She's spoken in numerous ministry events like *Women Of Faith*, *Compassion International*, and FamilyLife events. She was a featured speaker at our 2018 *Blended and Blessed*® livestream.

Michele and her husband, Troy, have been married for almost two decades and have a complicated blended family. You'll learn all about that in just a few minutes. They live in Denver, Colorado.

You heard Michele talk a minute ago about some of the pain in her life. You're going to hear more about that in just a minute but our zoom conversation really started with laughter.

You know one of the things that we do around here is we like to keep up with all the terms that we hear for stepfamilies. [Laughter] We have a running list, you know.

Michele: Terms, I think terms is a fairly safe word for this.

Ron: Exactly.

Michele: We can call them other things but we'll just stick with terms. [Laughter]

Ron: Here's my little short list, the "merged family". Some people have heard that.

Michele: —“merged family”? Kind of like—

Ron: —merging onto the freeway.

Michele: I was going to say, like traffic—

Ron: —at rush hour. There’s the “blended family”, of course. That’s another term.

Michele: Yes.

Ron: The “instant family” which to me sounds like coffee.

Michele: —really bad coffee. I don’t know if I like the “instant family”.

Ron: There is the “reconstituted family”, which sounds like orange juice. [Laughter] That is right, you know. Think about it. When you constitute something, you take something out like they do in orange juice. Then you reconstitute it, you put something back in. That’s where that term came from and started being—

Michele: —“reconstituted”.

Ron: Yes. Yes.

Michele: Okay.

Ron: They get better. A couple of academic terms that are floating around the world today that I read in the academic literature that I read about blended families and it’s the “step nuclear hybrid family”.

Michele: As if we needed more complication things to remember.

Ron: Just for the listener, “step nuclear hybrid” means it’s a stepfamily, meaning there’s at least one stepparent, stepchild relationship but there’s also a biological child to the new couple. So you have a step family and a nuclear family that’s been a hybrid together. And my personal favorite terms, the “multiple partner fertility family”. [Laughter]

Michele: I’m sorry. I can’t even breathe. [Laughter]

Ron: This is a family that one or both of the adults has had at least you know two children by two different partners.

Michele: I think we should hashtag that, #MPFF. MPFF—the Multiple Partner Fertility Family.

Ron: Now, I now have a new term talking to you because you—now some people would call your family a *yours, mine, and theirs*. You have adopted children. We'll get into that in a minute. But you call your family—we'll have to add this to the list—an "atypical, non-traditional blended blended family". [Laughter]

Michele: Yes, it was my way of trying to evoke a little extra measure of sympathy for our complicated household. [Laughter]

Ron: Well, I hope it works. We all need a little sympathy from somebody.

Michele: We need a little, and ours really is atypical, non-traditional blended blended. We have gone through the Vitamix a few times around here and it's, it's quite an adventure.

Ron: Well, for the listener who's confused, we are going to make sense out of this. You're going to understand why in just a minute as we begin to unpack Michele's family story.

I do want to start with this though. One of your taglines, one of the messages—you're a speaker, you're an author, you're out in front of people a lot, you're influencing, you're doing the podcast thing, all kinds of stuff—one of the messages that you really like to share with people is trying to help them make peace with the life that they have—

Michele: Yes.

Ron: —the life that they've found themselves in. In fact, you wrote a book called *Undone*, and the subtitle is *Making Peace with an Unexpected Life*. Now I got a quick observation here and then I want you to comment on that. I've had some tragedy in my life. In my experience when people say, "Oh, you just need to make peace with the life you have," or some sort of trite little saying like that, my experience is they have not had any hard in their life. That is not you.

Michele: That—it would not be me. You are correct.

Ron: You have had cancer of the tongue three times—

Michele: Yes.

Ron: —multiple surgeries. You had to learn how to eat again, how to swallow again, how to talk again. You've had experience of an unwanted divorce and later found yourself frustrated in a blended family, you didn't think was going to last. You've adopted three what you call difficult-to-love kids that have taught you so much about trauma and backgrounds and parenting.

You have been through hard. Yet you talk about making peace with the life you have. Help us understand.

Michele: Well, at some point for a long time, I tried to change the life I had. I thought that if I—you know I'm pretty good at being in charge—I thought that if I could appoint myself president of the universe, I could get everybody to get in line and I could create the life that I wanted. As we both know, that doesn't work.

Ron: That's right.

Michele: All it does is frustrate and disappoint everybody. The more controlling I was, trying to create this life that I had dreamed of, the more disappointed, discouraged and disillusioned I was. For me, the last twenty-five years or so of my life have been one hard thing after another. There has been no release. There's not been any break. I realized that no matter how hard I try to create that dream that I once had, it wasn't going to happen.

I either needed to live the life I had or constantly stay disillusioned and almost bitter with what my reality was. I had a choice. The making peace, as you know, that's an active verb. It's still happening. I'm still making peace with the life that I have, this unexpected life. It's never going to be over. But I had to make a choice. Either I can sit around here pining away for what could've been but can't be now or I can learn to love the life that I have right in front of me.

Ron: Do you think there's some real differences between people who are victimized by their life and are constantly in a position of being a victim of it, versus people like you that are saying, "I'm dealing with the life that I've been given." There's got to be some distinct differences.

Michele: Absolutely, there's a lot of difference. I mean the way we respond and deal with crises is apparent. But I think the biggest difference between a person who chooses to be a victim and the person who chooses to be a participant of the life that they have is daily choices. I mean I have to wake up every day and choose not to put myself in a victim role, to choose to not see myself as a cancer victim but someone who has experienced cancer but happens to still be alive today so we're going to keep going forward.

I have to choose that over and over again. I have to choose that as I parent these three beautiful children that have come from a very hard place. I can either choose to be angry about all of the wrong things that happened early on in their childhood, I can choose to feel a victim, or I can choose to sit there and go, "Hey, this is what we've got. What are we doing to do with it?"

Ron: I know the Lord is a part of that for you. I mean I'm hearing Paul as you're talking, just walking through all the difficult things that he's been through and to come to that

place where he says, "...to live is Christ, and to die is gain." You know, "it is what it is and I am walking with God through it."

Michele: Yes. I think some of it requires us to reframe or to understand and accept that pain and suffering is part of the human experience. I lived for a long time thinking that as a Christian if I do everything right, I should have a perfect life. If I do all the good stuff and I make all the good choices and love God and follow Him, then my life should be pain free. Actually, there is nothing biblical about that belief. Jesus says just the opposite that in this world we *will* have trouble, period.

For me, I've had to realize that my life won't be good once any kind of difficulty is gone, that joy comes or peace comes when I realize that God's presence is right here in the pain, that God is where the pain is. Rather than waiting for all of it to be gone, to somehow assimilate it into that is a normal part of the human experience.

Ron: God is where the pain is. That is so good. I'm just reflecting on that because I think, like you, earlier in my life I thought performance, good performance, will bring good blessing. Like it's within my powers—that's really what I'm saying—it's within my power to have life go the way I want it to.

Then God is here when the pain? That doesn't seem to fit. I think most of us go, "Wait a minute, wait a minute. Pain tells me God has abandoned me." And you're saying, "No, no, no, that's just the opposite."

Michele: —just the opposite. Remember the point where God met humanity and the closest place was at the cross. The place where God came and connected with his people at the very closest moment was at the foot of the cross, in other words, in a place of suffering. Very literally, God was where the pain is and He still is.

Some of this, I believe, is part of our American Western civilization mentality that we basically wake up feeling entitled to a good life and that really isn't the context that the vast majority of the world lives by.

Ron: A few minutes ago, you said something about the dream that you had for your life. In your book, *Undone*, you write that meeting your first husband was like, "a dream come true. It was like a storybook wedding," you said.

Michele: Yes.

Ron: And then you say, "It took less than a month for the mirage to fade." What happened?

Michele: Yes. Well, some details are not mine to share so I will be very careful about what I share at this point. However, I grew up in the church. I've loved Jesus since—I've loved Jesus as long as I can remember. I've been reading the Bible since I could read.

It's always—Jesus has always been so central to my life and I was that good, quote, unquote, “good Christian girl”—going to church multiple days a week and going to church camp and I went to Bible college and all of that.

When I married a pastor, it had all of the appearances of everything was falling into place. I was doing exactly what God wanted me to do and God was answering all my dreams and prayers. However, even Christians fail and make mistakes. Even Christians are broken and even pastors are broken.

That's what happened in my case. Within a month of being married, it was very clear that the man I thought I married wasn't really who the man was.

Over the course of about six years and endless counseling, it became very clear that I could not save our marriage. What do you do with that? When you're a twenty-something girl who's always believed in Jesus and always believed that He hears and answers our prayer. What do you do when hundreds of thousands of prayers are seemingly unanswered?

Ron: It leaves you in a place where you're wondering if God is in the pain.

Michele: Yes, exactly.

Ron: As a matter of fact, in your book—I'm quoting you again—in *Undone*, you say this, “When you're raised to believe in the covenant of marriage few things devastate like the ripping of divorce. The phrase ‘God hates divorce’ is a phrase I heard nearly as often as ‘God is love’ but how was I to reconcile those two? Could God overlook His hatred of divorce to still love me? Could He see beyond my Scarlet D?”

You weren't sure if He could.

Michele: I actually didn't think He could. I had grown up in the church and I had even committed my life to full-time Christian service, to doing ministry.

I believed at twenty-seven because I was divorced, that I was completely excluded from any participation in the kingdom. That being divorced meant that I was no longer qualified to do anything in God's name because I had committed what I believed was the unpardonable sin.

Ron: If somebody walked up to you today and said, “That's me. That's the way I feel.” What would you say?

Michele: I would say, oh goodness, I would just say, “Jesus didn't die for perfect people. He died for broken people. If God only used people who had everything all together and had done everything right, there would be nobody in the ministry, not a single one. That that is the beauty of grace, that for whatever reason God chose to

reach down from the perfection of heaven into the flaw of humanity and decided to show Himself to us and then invited us to participate in what He's doing."

I think what has been the most meaningful for me is I really thought that perfection was the only offering that God could use. I have come to realize over the last twenty, twenty-five years that broken people don't connect to perfection. Broken people connect with the brokenness in other people.

So the struggles and the questions and the regrets and the mistakes are actually the greatest point of connection with people who are in places of pain and suffering. Which only confirms the fact that God is where the pain is, right?

Ron: It gives you more influence and a stronger voice with other people who are experiencing the same thing. We just have to have, wow, the courage to share that broken part of us.

Michele: Yes. Well, and you know what that requires? An acknowledgement of the fact that no matter how hard we try to be good enough we will never be that and just that beautiful humility of accepting 100 percent God's sufficient grace.

When we come to that place where we finally realize that our performance is not going to get us to heaven, that the only thing that gets us to heaven is Jesus, then all of a sudden we have both the humility and the confidence to be able to share our brokenness because our salvation isn't dependent on us anymore.

Ron: Did anyone respond to you the way you just said you would respond to somebody now? I mean, did you find support and encouragement from people around you?

Michele: There was one friend who did. But unfortunately, this was back in the '90s. This was a long time ago. [Laughter]

Quite honestly, at that time in the church, divorce was pretty much the hottest topic that churches, at least my churches that I was a part of, really didn't know how to deal with divorced people. It was really considered such a horrendous breach of covenant. Honestly, I had more people quote Scripture at me at what I needed to do to redeem myself and fix myself than people who entered in.

Ron: Yes, I've heard that story a million times over the years that I've been doing ministry and I'm so sorry, so sorry.

Michele: Well, I am too. But at the same time, it's what makes me so committed to showing extravagant grace for people who end up in an unexpected life.

Ron: Yes, I know many of our listeners—not everybody listening has been through a divorce—they have been through some sort of loss. Somebody has. But maybe even if

they haven't been divorced, they can relate to the single parent years that you experienced.

Michele: Yes.

Ron: What were those like for you?

Michele: Exhausting. [Laughter]

Ron: It's all on you, right?

Michele: It's all on me. I was a young twenty-something woman. I lived a thousand miles away from my family so I had no family backup. I had a bachelor's degree in nursing. But being a single mom of a twenty-two month old, I couldn't work 12-hour night shifts at the hospital with a baby.

I had to reinvent myself and come up with a new career. I went into computer networking sales, if you can believe that. I know, crazy, but it was a 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. job so I could have daycare.

I just remember those years were very hard. I was very broke. I remember my son and I—he was a toddler—getting up, getting him ready for daycare, dropping him off, going to work, coming home, picking him up, running to the grocery store, hurrying and making dinner. You know the drill. We had very little extra. We ate lots of pasta and tuna. But if you would ask my son today who's now 22, those were some of the sweetest years too.

Ron: Then you meet this guy named Troy.

Michele: Troy.

Ron: He's got a couple of kids himself.

Michele: Yes, this guy named Troy cutie-patootie, was at church. I just thought he was the sweetest thing ever. He had two boys, single dad just like I was a single mom of a boy. You know, we believed it played out just like on TV, so we thought it would be pretty fun to just bring our families together and have a nice happy ending. [Laughter]

Ron: And was it so—I mean the dating? Take us through that dating period and some of those decisions about getting married. What do you remember or recall?

Michele: Oh, again, you're asking a woman who's pushing 50 to remember her 20's so be careful.

Ron: Okay. [Laughter]

Michele: Well, dating was—you know both of us working full time trying to pay our bills and take care of our children. We were very careful about how much we spent time together, bringing the boys together. We didn't want them to have more loss, right. So having to navigate how do we spend time together without rushing too quickly and all of that?

Of course, I look back on it now and think, "Gosh, we could have handled all of that so much better." But when you're twenty and you're so hungry for connection and relationship and you are broken, you do all kinds of things from emotion that isn't always intellectually wise.

Ron: Right, right. Let's just jump off there for a minute.

Michele: Okay.

Ron: Because I know people listening—we all have regrets. My story is I got married when I was nineteen. Okay, and no, we weren't pregnant. [Laughter] I actually did it on purpose. Looking back I think, "What was I thinking?"

Michele: What were you thinking?

Ron: Clearly I wasn't thinking. I got married in Iowa. I couldn't even sign my own wedding license. My dad had to sign it because you had to be twenty to sign the license. I mean, that should have told me something, right? Got married at nineteen. Nan was twenty years of age. Then we go and do mission work for three months in Kenya with my parents. Like, that's another—

Michele: That's so good. I was going to say that's so helpful for a new marriage, isn't it.

Ron: Exactly, right? We're establishing our own household and our own boundaries. No, we're living out of their pocket. You know, so many things. All of us have things we look back at and we have regret over. Like, "What was I thinking?"

Yet here's the thing that I can't help but notice, somehow there's enough grace for the day. Even when it doesn't turn out well, somehow we look back and God was there and He was teaching

Michele: Yes.

Ron: We've learned more. If it wasn't for those things, we wouldn't be where we are today. We've made decisions because of that. I mean, do you feel that same sort of thing?

Michele: Absolutely, absolutely. You know Troy and I started dating way too soon after my husband left and his wife left. We had not—you know we were twenty, right.

Ron: You didn't know what you didn't know.

Michele: We didn't know and we did what textbook not to do, right. We took all of our emotional pain and tried to find its healing in another person, right.

Ron: Not a good idea.

Michele: It doesn't work. It doesn't work, right. It just leads to more pain and disappointment and more healing required. However, here I am. My husband and I, we've been married for 18 years now. We're defying the odds and we love each other and all I see is God's grace.

Ron: That's great.

Michele: —God's grace.

Ron: That's it. Okay, so I've got to quote you one more time because we've now come to the point where you form a blended family. Well, let me see it's—I got to get this right—it's your "atypical"—where'd it go?

Michele: —non-traditional—"atypical, non-traditional blended blended family."

Ron: Got it, okay. The kids were four, seven and nine when you guys got married. You had high hopes.

You write in *Undone*, "A blended family, they call it, which is laughable now." You say, "Five individuals thrown into a high-powered electrical kitchen appliance along with the frozen ruins of two divorces nobody wanted and we think that's going to blend? Stepfamilies do not blend like peanuts into peanut butter or strawberries into smoothies. They blend like..." I love this, "They blend like nails and screws. Somebody's going to get hurt."

Michele: Yes!

Ron: What were the hurts? What were the nails and screws in the blender? What was that like for you guys?

Michele: Oh, where do I begin? Do you—how many episodes is this podcast? I mean, so many. Again, I had come from a very hard marriage with lots of emotional brokenness so I was trying to find my own sense of security in this new relationship. I was chasing after my husband to get all those security needs met. At the same time we have four, seven and nine year old.

The seven and nine year old had 50, 50 custody arrangements so every Monday they would go to a different parent's house. From Monday to Monday we'd have three boys in our house and then from the next Monday to Monday we would have an only child. My son's from my prior marriage. He was with us full time.

My stepsons would come home for seven days and a whole entire different dynamic. They wanted Dad's undivided attention, naturally. But I'm an insecure woman needing to know that this marriage is going to make it. You have all of those insecurities playing.

Then you have a four year old, let's just say a four year old. Everybody knows what that's like. That's it's own dynamic, whose father basically abandoned him so he had his own insecurity issues. Those kinds of things.

There was me trying really really hard to help my stepsons know that I love them. I had grown up with a father who told me horror stories about his stepmom and how he never felt loved and accepted. So I was hyper vigilant to make sure I didn't cause *that* mistake. But it created all kinds of tension with the biological mom.

You know, all of those different dynamics and we haven't mentioned parent-teacher conferences and sporting events and holidays. It was just messy.

Ron: We call that around here, *complexity*. Here at *FamilyLife Blended*, we just call that complexity. All of that is difficult and challenging and stressful, and stress works on your heart. It seemed to work on your heart because you talk about you got negative, you got discouraged, and you began to think, "This is not what I signed up for."

Michele: Yes.

Ron: That's kind of where all those insecurities and that complexity takes you, isn't it? You begin to backpedal on this whole decision to get married.

Michele: Yes.

Ron: How far did that take you? Did that—was that noticeable to Troy? Did he do the same thing and did you notice that?

Michele: Yes, I think we both did. When you come out of a divorce you didn't want, you feel a lot of guilt for how you caused your children to get this broken family history, right. I know Troy felt a lot of guilt for the fact that he was divorced and his poor sons have to navigate two different homes. What happens is we both would go to separate camps trying to make up for our guilt about that.

Ron: Right.

Michele: Humans don't enjoy pain and discomfort so we tend to pull away from anything that hurts. What I saw us do—we never separated or anything—we always pressed through—my husband and I are two of the most stubborn people alive—but what I did see happen is in those early years, we would separate into camps. Because we went to what was most comfortable and safe for us and those biological relationships felt the safest.

Ron: Right, right. You'd pull back into your son and he'd pull back into his two.

Michele: Yes, exactly. Which only furthered, right, the insecurity—

Ron: Yes.

Michele: —and it tapped into the wounds from the prior relationships. You can see how that would go down.

Ron: Absolutely.

I heard you say this at *Blended and Blessed*[®]. Then I read it in your book, *Undone*, that at that point—this whole conversation for our listener has come to this moment where the story is the story and it creates the angst and the anxiety and the tension and the stress and the complexity, and then there comes this moment of, “Okay, what do we do?”

Michele: Yes.

Ron: You made some decisions that radically changed some things. You write, “I decided to leave and cleave.” That began to take on a couple of things. You say you paid more attention to what was beautiful and good than what was wrong. Do you mind sharing a little bit about that?

Michele: Yes, one of the examples that I share in the book is my husband, Troy. One of his strengths is—well, let me put it this way—he's a true introvert, and God bless him, much less emotionally reactive than I am, which is a good thing. However, that can look like detachment and withdrawal, especially for a woman that's very insecure coming out of a broken relationship.

Rather than just looking at him as detached, I started to look at him as this very stable, consistent, faithful person who would always be there. That changes, that helps me to see not just the down side of that personality but the huge gift that was as well. I had to decide what I was going to focus on.

The same was true with my stepkids as well. Learning to look at them and see the positive side of the things that frustrated me or irritated me.

Ron: That is so challenging because something inside you is going—well, the insecurity is talking, the fear is talking, the guilt is talking, and all of that is driving you back to where it's safe, there's safe camps. Now you have to say, "But I have to lean into the idea that Troy is not against me. That somehow Troy's stability in his personality is an asset and I can move toward that."

Michele: Yes.

Ron: Because that's really ultimately what it lead you to do is you'd have to trust that it was okay to lean into him. Those are huge moments.

Michele: Those are massive, huge moments and they don't happen in a day. They happen in a thousand small decisions day after day. I had to first create a new set of blueprints for family. For that early few years I was trying to recreate traditional family. I was trying to recreate ideal marriage. I needed to get new blueprints for what this family would look like and realize that we were—this was something brand new, not a recreation or a resurrection of something that was dead.

That helped, but also then choosing to—basically, I wanted my husband and new children, my stepchildren to offer me grace as I was navigating the complexity. I wanted that desperately. I wanted them to give me second and third chances. Well, if I wanted that for myself, I needed to be willing to offer it to them as well. It's only fair.

Ron: Absolutely. Okay, there are a couple other things that you write about that you did that I think are just great, great words of wisdom for our listener. You stopped voicing every frustration.

Michele: This is an ongoing challenge for me. Can I just admit? [Laughter] Makes me laugh. I'm a verbal processor so I've had to learn that not everything I think needs to be processed with the people in my family. Sometimes there's other ways that I can process frustrations and hurts, like journaling or chatting with a trusted friend or praying. But learning that at times, I need to just pray it and not say it.

Ron: Oh, that's good. That's so good. Let's get behind this. Because if you say it every time, that's doing you some good because you're a verbal processor and you're getting it out and you're sharing it and you're not withdrawing into yourself. You're actually moving toward somebody by sharing this. But at the same time, if you what you share is negative, it's hard for them to hear. That, I would assume, makes it difficult for them to see you as trustworthy, somebody safe to be around.

Michele: Absolutely, right? Safety and criticism don't coexist.

Ron: Right.

Michele: They can't hold the same space.

Ron: That's right.

Michele: People don't connect in places that are unsafe. The more that I was criticizing, nitpicking, nagging, expressing every frustration, nobody wanted to enter into that space with me and had hearts—what I wanted more than anything is to have relationship.

So I needed to pick and choose, first of all, what to voice—what difficulties, because we can't stuff it all—we do have to talk through some difficulties—what to voice but also the right timing to voice it.

Ron: Let me just add another little tip here. I think it's really a good discipline in this, is as you voice—you've got to voice some things—voice it as a complaint less as a criticism. I think there's a huge difference.

By the way, what's often behind the criticisms that we give one another in marriage and parenting, in kids, step kids—whatever the situation is—mother-in-law, there's a wish underneath that criticism. Like, "I wish you and I could talk more openly about some hard things," "I wish I felt safer with you," "I wish I was less angry or you were less angry." But what we do is offer a criticism that is blaming against the other person that makes it worse.

Michele: Yes.

Ron: "You're just angry all the time and I can't be around you when you're like that." No, no, no—a complaint shares the wish. It's a softer way of communicating the same needs.

It may sound a little bit like, "You know, I miss us talking about some of these things and not getting at one another's throats," "I really would like to be closer to you right now. Your anger scares me a little bit, so I just need some help trying to figure this out with you."

That is very different than, "All you do is get angry. You hate me. I hate you." Trying to voice things as a complaint allows you to talk about what you're feeling but does it in a way that it doesn't add more difficulty to the relationship.

There's another thing that you talked about that I think is really good, one more. You changed your internal negative self-commentary.

Michele: I would even add an -ing. I am changing my anger.

Ron: These are all present verbs you're saying, yes.

Michele: I think it's so important because we have this idea in our head that one day we're going to be all there. I just want the listeners to know—I mean I've been working on this stuff for pushing three decades now—I mean, we're all learning. We're learning. We're learning.

I still am learning. But yes, I had to change my own negative self-commentary. There's lots of history behind how I got myself—how I learned early on to do negative self-talk. But I had to and still have to catch my narrative because it wasn't serving me or our family well.

Ron: Oh, that is so important. What a discipline to manage how you're thinking about what's going on in the family and yourself and the relationships and try to shift that in a direction that's going to be helpful rather than harmful.

Michele: One example of that is I felt like in this blended family, remarriage situation that I was failing. I would be hurt and angry at the failures in my—the perceived failures in my family members. But ultimately, I felt like I wasn't doing it right. It was that sense of shame and failure.

Boy, I found that I would so quickly go to, "I'm failing. I'm blowing it. I just can't do this. I'm just not good enough. I can't figure it out." It's taken me a long time. But to stop saying the words "I'm failing" and instead say the words "I'm learning."

Ron: That's huge.

Michele: It's massive. "I'm failing" is almost like a definitive wall that you can't breach. "I'm learning" is like pulling up a chair in the front of the classroom. You just take notes. No matter how much you fail you write down, "Oh well, I learned something today. Don't do that." "Okay, well I've learned something about this person today. They need this." Putting yourself in the position of a student is so important for us if we are going to grow. We don't heal by calling ourselves a failure.

Ron: That goes so vertical, Michele, because if we're a learner that's the word disciple, right?

Michele: Yes.

Ron: We are a student of the Master and we are trying to be more and more like Him, to relax that self-guilt and shame and humiliation we put on ourselves and say, "I'm not good enough. I'm never going to make it. I'm failing" —and to go, "Wait a minute. I am walking in the footsteps of the Savior and I'm trying to figure this out. He has grace for me in this journey."

Michele: Absolutely. The thing is, it has to start with us doing it to ourselves first before we can ever offer it to somebody else. What happens is we're saying, "You're doing it

wrong.” If we’re telling ourselves, “You’re failing. You can’t get it right.” Then we’re going to mimic that kind of criticism with the people around us.

Ron: Right.

Michele: When we start to reframe it internally and say, “You know what, I’m learning,” all of a sudden we change the entire environment of the household. “You know what, Buddy, yes, you’re right you didn’t handle that situation the best but you’re learning. What did you learn from this? We’ll figure it out together and we’ll do it a little bit better next time.”

Ron: Okay, so at this point in the story you have one child. He has two. You guys have merged that and yet there’s these “theirs” children that we referenced earlier. Bring us up to speed about that. You adopted three children and there’s a history there that makes a huge difference.

Michele: Yes.

Ron: Let’s talk about what you’ve learned about parenting children who are difficult to love.

Michele: Well, you had mentioned earlier that I’m a three-time tongue cancer survivor. I was diagnosed with cancer in 2010, initially. Initially, it was caught very early and we thought it would never come back again.

What’s interesting is that first cancer diagnosis, it caused me to have a significant level of fear. I’ll explain why this is important in just a second. But when you all of a sudden realize your own mortality, your sense of security and safety is kind of turned upside down because you have no idea. Here we had just come through all these other hard things. I’m like, “I don’t even know if I’m going to be here to raise my kids.”

Well, eight months after that we got a phone call. We were on the verge of empty nest. Our two oldest boys had graduated from high school. Our youngest boy was getting ready to drive a car, which as you know, once they start driving you don’t see them anymore. [Laughter]

So we were on the verge of empty nest, and after all of those years of stepfamily, we didn’t call it empty nest, we gave it another name. We called it “The Promised Land”. We were like, “Thank you! Thank you, Jesus, that you helped us to survive.” Seriously, we were so ready for empty nest.

Eight weeks after our second son graduated from high school we got a phone call in July of 2011, from a woman, a connection who knew of three children who needed a home. They were twin four-year-olds and a five-year-old who had been raised in, I’ll just

say, an addictive environment which now's been labeled by therapists as severe abuse, neglect.

The question was asked of my husband and I, "Will you take them?" I have to tell you my initial response was, "Are you kidding me?"

Ron: The Promised Land, I can see it.

Michele: I can almost see the Promised Land. Do not make me wander 40 more years in the wilderness, please. But quite honestly my experience with cancer and knowing what it was like to wake up every day afraid created in me a bond with these children who every day of their tiny lives had been marked by fear.

In addition to that, both my husband and I felt like our experience with stepfamily had actually prepared us for a complex family like bringing in children from trauma and neglect. So 24 hours later we packed up our, what was going to be, our empty-nest car with borrowed car seats, because we didn't have car seats anymore, and we drove to another state and picked up twin four-year-olds and a five-year-old and started parenting all over again.

Ron: That story, people hear that and you go, "Oh man, that is so amazing that your hearts are so big. [Laughter] You're my hero, and it all worked out just perfectly, right?"

Michele: Whenever people say that, and I hear it quite frequently, I'm like, "You better back up because I kind of want to slap you right now."

Ron: Yes, no. I mean, you don't adopt three children who have been through repeated trauma in their life and just discover that life works exactly the way you thought it was going to. All of a sudden, I would think, your family is very much oriented around their fears and anxieties—

Michele: Yes.

Ron: —and less so much around what you intended for them.

Michele: Absolutely, a hundred percent. Although we had some awareness and education of what this entailed, nobody can really prepare you for what it's like until you actually live it.

Ron: Okay, what I want to do here, let me just jump in for the listener who's going, "Wow, I can't relate to that. I don't have that situation." We're going to talk about the things that you've learned about parenting difficult, hard-to-love kids. But I just want the listener to translate that into your world, and maybe it's a child or a stepchild, maybe it's a mother-in-law, maybe it's a former mother-in-law. Whatever that little difficult, hard-to-

love person is in your life, let's just kind of hear some things, absorb it, and translate that into the level or intensity that is appropriate for your situation.

Big picture here, Michele. What do you think has been some of the biggest lessons that you've learned about parenting hard-to-love kids?

Michele: Well, by far the biggest is in my study and research of trauma, the impact of trauma on children is how it really does have a biological basis. We think when children react, whether it's in a new stepfamily situation, a divorce situation, a death situation or like in these three children's case with trauma and abuse in their background, we think they're just poorly behaved. We think it's bad behavior, right?

They explode, they rage, they cry, they throw things, they mouth off, and say horrible things to you. We immediately label that as bad behavior that needs correction, and yes, poor decisions need correction. However, in my study of trauma and the impact on the body, I started to understand how significant loss and trauma truly impacts their brain's ability to process pain and difficulty and anything that would trigger them.

At times, it causes them to react in a way from a place of pain that they don't always have complete control over. Part of our job as parents is to help them learn new strategies to cope with grief and loss, to help their brains and bodies to be able to function the way that they were made to function.

Ron: At the extreme level, kids like the three that you adopted from a very young age are living through repeated traumatic situations that is literally wiring the neurology of their brain—

Michele: Absolutely.

Ron: —so that they are reacting in ways flight, fight, freeze, overreacting, unable to really control themselves in stressful situations.

Michele: Yes.

Ron: At the far other end of that continuum is all of us. If you've ever been through a situation where you were hurt or disappointed or had something pretty significant happen, you too have been, in a way, slightly programmed toward assuming bad things are going to happen. Again, that brings up that anxiety, that fear that—and it moves us towards those same mechanisms, fight, flight, or freeze. We're somewhere on that continuum, most of us, walking around in life.

Michele: Yes.

Ron: When you see, in your case, a child, “Boy, they’re overreacting. What’s brought this on?” And you just think, “We just need some externals. Do some punishment and it’ll fix this.” You’ve got to get underneath it, right?

Michele: Yes, yes, you have to. You know what taught me about this—this is such a strange thing—I won’t get into the theology of this, but what helped me to understand this the most is when I went through my third cancer diagnosis which was so traumatic, involving some pretty horrific treatments. In short, I’ll just say that I had a feeding tube and a tracheostomy and didn’t have food for six months. Almost didn’t live.

On the backside of all that medical trauma, I had some very real PTSD, some triggers, some trauma, and I started to notice I had reactions. My body would react in a way. Even though I intellectually could tell myself, don’t do that, it was like my body was responding in a way that I didn’t have control over.

That helped me to really connect with these kids that have gone through significant trauma, especially in the early years of life while the brain and the neuro synapsis, everything are forming. It really does alter their responses. I need to not just try to be punitive but to step into that place of trauma with them and hold their hand and walk them through it.

Ron: Let’s talk a little bit more about that because I think one of the mistakes that people make is, “Oh, this kid’s been through some hard stuff. I’m going to take it easy on him. I’m never going to hold him accountable for just contributing around the house or taking care of their stuff or putting away their dishes or putting their clothes in the hamper,” that we just go so light that we expect nothing of them.

I don’t think that’s the route to take. But at the same time, you’ve got to get underneath and try to help them process their own experience and what it’s doing within them, yes?

Michele: Yes, absolutely. That begins first of all with understanding how the brain functions. You mentioned that before with the fight, flight, freeze, but there’s multiple parts of the brain and doing some simple research to understand the brain stem is purely reactive and instinctual.

The amygdala is kind of the emotional center. Then you’ve got the prefrontal cortex which is all part of decision making, executive function. When somebody gets triggered all three of those parts become disconnected and the only thing that operates is the fight, flight, or freeze.

What we have to do is get all of those different parts of the brain back into wholeness. Health comes when those three parts of the brain connect again, because then the fight, flight, or freeze part of the brain can sense danger. The emotions can name it and say, “This feels good or bad.” But then, the executive part of the brain can say, “But I’m going to make a choice in how I’m going to respond.”

What's so interesting is children can't bring those parts of their brain together on their own. What they need is somebody to come alongside them and create safety, right. When we create safety, when we touch a hand, or have a soothing voice, or help them take deep breaths, then all of a sudden the brain calms down, it reconnects, and then we can talk about what happened.

Ron: There's so much in what you're saying. I know if the listener's like me, you're going, "I'm feeling a little overwhelmed by all this. How am I going to learn all this?" A full summary of everything that could happen that we can do is beyond the scope of this podcast.

Michele: Yes.

Ron: But let's just say we want to encourage you learn and to study. I think maybe even you have a book coming up. A little preview here of a book that's not out yet that will talk about this. Can you give us the title real quick?

Michele: Yes, it's called *Relentless: The Unshakable Presence Of A God Who Never Leaves*. In short, it's about how when we were at our worst, God didn't pull away and punish. He pushed in and loved.

Ron: Yes. You know what, there it is. The best thing for a dysregulated child is a regulated adult.

Michele: Yes.

Ron: When we manage ourselves—and it's so hard—when our kids get crazy, we get a little discombobulated too—but when we discipline ourselves in that moment, we're modeling for the child, we're showing them what that integrated brain looks like, and we're responding to the underlying emotions in the child, not necessarily just what's happening on the outside of the child.

That is exactly what God has done for us. He has never been, because of our sin and craziness, dysregulated, if I could use that big psychological term. He's never become like us in that sense. He's always responded out of love and faithfulness and what is good and holy and right. In so doing, is able to move toward us through Christ, create connection, offer us hope and a path back towards Him where He then teaches and trains through the Holy Spirit for us to be more like Him in that sense as well.

It is vertical and it is horizontal in how it gets played out for us in our homes in our parenting.

Michele: It requires a significant level of self-awareness. I still get dysregulated at times.

Ron: Sure.

Michele: We have moments where—when you have three children, I guess even three neuro-typical kind of children in the home, it just happens. We get dysregulated in any relationship. I have to stop and pay attention and say, “You know what? I’m feeling overwhelmed and out of control right now. I need to take a break. I love you. You matter to me. We’ll talk about this in just a minute. I just need about fifteen minutes to calm myself down and then let’s connect again.”

Ron: Wow, that is so good! Over time that has to take root in a child. They watch you do that and they kind of, “Maybe I need to do the same thing.” That would be part of the prayer, of course, for them.

Michele: That’s the point. The point isn’t to never get dysregulated. The point is to model what we do when it happens.

Ron: I love your mantra, “Connect before you correct.” Mind saying a little bit more about that?

Michele: I was going to say is who I heard this from—it maybe have been Karen Kervis, or some other different therapist I’ve worked with over the years—but, “Connect before you correct.” Too many times we try to immediately, the moment we see a poor decision or bad behavior, we move to correct.

What happens is, whether it’s in just a stepfamily relationship or a trauma relationship like this, is correction without relationship is resisted, right? I think about this for myself. If somebody tries to correct me that has no relationship with me, I don’t receive it very well. [Laughter]

Ron: Yes.

Michele: I need to have the safety of *connection* before I can receive *correction*. With our children, I think at times in our exuberance to make sure we keep them on the straight and narrow, we just launch right into correction again and again and again without doing connection first.

One analogy—this is by I believe it was Daniel Seagull who has written several books on brain health and children from trauma—but he used the analogy of a dog bite. Imagine you are out for a walk and a dog breaks free from his leash and comes after you and puts his big toothy mouth all the way over your hand. I mean he just clamps down on your hand, right.

Your impulse as a human is to pull your hand out, right. But pulling your hand out of a dog bite is actually when the damage happens. The secret to getting your hand out of a

dog bite is to push in. When you push into the dog's mouth it hits that tender part, they immediately release, and then you can pull your hand out.

When you pull away in the heat of the conflict, it actually makes the damage worse. I think of this all the time because we don't enjoy connecting with people who are behaving poorly. But if I can sit with that discomfort and create safety, whether it's a colleague or a stepfamily or my children, if I can sit with that and push in and say, "You know what, I love you. I can see that this is really upsetting you and that matters to me. I just want you to know I'm here."

What happens—that's pushing in—and what happens is you can just feel the air escape out of the tension, right. All of a sudden, things start to come down. It may take a while, several minutes or half hour, but pushing in changes the entire dynamic of the relationship and then you can talk through what happened.

Ron: You've been listening to my conversation with Michele Cushatt. I'm Ron Deal and this is *FamilyLife Blended*.

How does that connect-before-you-correct idea apply to our relationship with God? Well, Michele has a few words to share about that in just a minute.

Her story highlighted the power of decisions. For example, that leave-and-leave decision resulted in some very significant changes in how she viewed her family and how she responded to her family circumstances. Those changes brought blessings to her family.

You know Scripture clearly understands the significance of our decisions. Adam and Eve chose to doubt God's goodness. We read about that in Genesis, chapter 3. And then they ate of that forbidden fruit.

Moses chose to trust God to lead him as he spoke to Pharaoh. We read about that in Exodus, chapter three. When the Israelites lost their way, Joshua challenged them to make a decision. He said, "...choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your father served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house," Joshua said, "we will serve the Lord."

You see so many changes start with a significant decision. Then we make daily decisions to take little steps in the direction of the big decision. Following Christ is a really good example of this.

We choose to submit our will to God. Then we fall on His grace and then we "work out that salvation", quote, unquote, day in and day out by humbling ourselves, by loving our neighbor, by forgiving others as we have been forgiven, by taking off the human flesh and the temptations of the flesh and putting on the fruit of the Spirit. Every one of those

is a decision, some little, some big, depending on how you look at it. But all have significant implications for how we live our lives as disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me encourage you today with Joshua's words, "...choose this day whom you will serve." Now this might be the very first time you've ever made that decision or it could be that today is a recommitment of that decision that you made at some point in your life. Either way it matters. With the Holy Spirit's help, there's power in that decision.

If you'd like more information about Michele and her book, *Undone*, you can find it in our show notes. Check it out on the *FamilyLife Blended* page at FamilyLife.com/podcasts. We want you to know, we really enjoy hearing from you. Your feedback means a lot to us and positive reviews online, those are appreciated as well.

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If you like what you hear, would you do us a favor and help us spread the word. Tell a friend, a family member, tell somebody about this. Maybe they can learn something that will make a difference for their family as well.

Now, before we're done, a final word from Michele Cushatt about how God pushes in when we need Him most.

Michele: I think of all the times in my 47 years of life that I have ranted and raved against God, so frustrated with His apparent lack of attention to fixing my life, fixing all the things that were wrong. I'd be so frustrated and I've cried out to Him.

I mean, talk about emotion. I've had lots of really big, ugly emotions with God. Yet God chose to look beyond the loudest emotions to see me and to love me over and over again. He looked beyond all the woundedness, all of the anger and disappointment and frustration and even my attempts to push Him away at times.

He didn't withdraw. He just pushed a little bit closer in. And I am so glad that He did. For those of you who are listening, if you feel like you just have messed everything up just way too much that God is far off, let me just tell you, He is pushing in even now.

At this moment, He is pushing in because He sees you, not just a big bunch of mistakes that have been made, but He sees you and He loves you far more than your performance. He just loves you and He wants to walk with you through this and help you find wholeness and healing in your family and in your own heart.

Ron: Next time we'll hear from Kyle and Dr. Sheri Keffer about her new book, *Intimate Deception*.

Sheri: So I come home and I go into the office and there is this pink Post-it, "Thank you for everything you do. I really appreciate you." with a heart. Who gave him that?

Ron: That's Kyle and Sheri Keffer, next time on *FamilyLife Blended*.

I'm Ron Deal. Thanks for listening. Thanks to our FamilyLife Legacy Partners for making this podcast possible. Our chief audio engineer is Keith Lynch. Bruce Goff, our producer. Mastering engineer is Justin Adams. Theme music provided by Braden Deal.

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