**JONATHAN ROGERS, HOST:** Hello, Habit listeners! Jonathan Rogers here. Before we get started, I wanted to tell you about my new six week online writing course called Writing through the Wardrobe. Starting February 6th, we'll walk together through *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, to see what C.S. Lewis has to teach us about writing. To find out more, go to thehabit.co/wardrobe. Thanks. I hope to see you there.

(ACOUSTIC GUITAR THEME MUSIC)

**JR:** Welcome to The Habit Podcast: Conversations with Writers about Writing. I'm Jonathan Rogers, your host.

(THEME MUSIC CONTINUES)

**JR:** Lore Ferguson Wilbert is the author of *Handle with Care*, a book about the importance of touch in human interaction. Rabbit Room reviewer Jen Yokel says, "The best way to describe this book is an approachable theology of touch, woven with stories, kindness, and respect. She's isn't gonna outline a who to touch policy for you, but she might challenge you to at least give more hugs." Lore has also been blogging for twenty years at sayable.net.

Lore Ferguson Wilbert, thank you so much for being on The Habit podcast!

**LORE FERGUSON WILBERT:** Thank you so much for having me!

**JR:** I am uh, I'm so excited — I guess this episode is going to release right around the same time that your book *Handle with Care* releases. This will release on the third of February, and you release on the…

**LFW:** Fourth.

**JR:** Fourth.

**LFW:** Yep, we release on the fourth.

**JR:** Yeah. Great. So, tell me a little bit about what's going on in that book.

**LFW:** Yeah, it's called *Handle with Care*, and then it's got kind of a juicy subtitle: *How Jesus Redeems the Power of Touch in Life and Ministry*. And so, I'm just kind of talking through the gospels and the way that Jesus interacted as a body with other bodies. And… yeah! So…

**JR:** Yeah, and… I know that you're interested in incarnation.

**LFW:** Yeah! I am.

**JR:** [laughs] Well, you oughta be if you're a Christian person, but the a, uh… [pause] Let's talk a little bit about how writing and incarnation are related to one another. Because, you know, it's like Shakespeare said that the poet "gives to airy nothing / A local habitation and a name." Um, we are enfleshing, we're bringing big ideas down to the world where we live.

LFW: Yeah.

JR: So I imagine you've done some thinking along those lines.

**LFW:** I have actually done a little bit of thinking along those lines. I think probably when I started thinking about sort of incarnation, I was reading in college, I was reading a Rilke poem called "The Ninth Elegy," and in it he talks about making things sayable, and so we give things names. We call this a rock and a tree and a chair, those kind of things. We give them names and that makes them real. And so I think about writing as a form of incarnation. We're taking these ideas, and we're putting flesh on them. We're putting, um story — we're giving story to them. We're placing them sort of in the construct and the narrative of the place in which we live, and our thoughts and our theology and all of those things. And so, I think that's mostly how I think about incarnation and writing as it pertains to humans.

**JR:** So when you say, uh… [pause] we… I may be misquoting you here, but you said we make things real when we put words to them?

**LFW:** Mmhm.

**JR:** Is that a fair summation of what you just said?

**LFW:** Well, that's what Rilke said. Yeah, he said [laughs] perhaps we're here just to say and to give, and to make things sayable.

**JR:** Huh. I can't decide how I feel about that. [pause] Uh… you know, just because, the… obviously, the thing has it's thinginess whether we say it or not.

**LFW:** It's true. It's true. I mean, that's the… this is a philosophy conversation as old as the day.

**JR:** Yeah, right.

**LFW:** I think, um… [pause] Especially as I think through — well, for instance. I mean, if we think about Jesus, God is real whether Jesus came or not. But he sent Jesus — our Father sent Jesus. And so he knew that some form of embodiment, some form of realness, some form of, um… flesh and blood was important, um… gonna be important to the gospel, and be important for his people. And so I think there's something true about that as well. When you talk about making things real by saying them — by giving them names, by giving them a story, by telling them who they are and what they are.

**JR:** Yeah.

**LFW:** And so they're real, whether we say that or not, just as God is real. But Jesus came to make it more real.

**JR:** Yeah. Yeah, okay. And make that reality accessible to us.

**LFW:** Yeah, exactly. yes.

**JR:** That makes sense.

**LFW:** Yeah.

**JR:** Um [pause] As I was thinking about what you — as I was thinking about your book about touch, and I mean it's literally about the value of touch in relationships and in faith and all those things, right? Um, I was thinking about something that — I thought it was Aquinas, but now I can't find it, where he says — he spoke of the sense of touch as the mother of all feeling, or the mother of all senses? Umm… which is pretty interesting. The point is it's through the sense of touch that we navigate the world in our bodies? And I think that probably is relevant to… to writing in some interesting ways. That… I started this conversation on an earlier episode with Helena Sorenson, and we didn't quite fini— I mean, I felt like there was a lot more we could've talked about, but I didn't have the mechanisms to, you know, continue thinking through it. But I have a feeling maybe you're just the person to talk through these things with.

**LFW:** I think — I mean, I don't know what Aquinas was saying in context. I think that, um… many writers have said, you know, Margaret Atwood has said touch comes before all other senses. There are lots of writers who've said that touch is, you know, the quintessential sense. And I think there's something to that, perhaps. But I also think that to someone who can't see or can't hear, those senses feel… they feel, perhaps, that they're missing something essential. And so I'm not sure how I feel about "the mother of all senses," but I think that feeling something is important to the work of writing. And I mean that in a physical sense, but also I mean in a sort of… an emotional sense as well.

I was thinking about, um — and I don't know the exact mechanics of leprosy, but I've heard it said that the thing about leprosy is that it, um…

you actually become numb. Your sense of touch becomes numb. And that's sort of how you start to sort of lose body parts or injure the same body parts again and again and again, because you can't feel.

**JR:** Yeah.

**LFW:** And so I find that really interesting — and I don't talk about this much in the book, but I find that really interesting as a writer, because I think if I am not feeling, if I'm numb to the world around me and the things that are inside of me and the things that the Lord is doing and the things that people around me are doing — if I'm numb to those things, eventually they're gonna… it's not gonna produce any kind of fruit.

**JR:** Yeah.

**LFW:** And so I find that the idea of touch as — perhaps as a mother of senses or maybe a chief sense, and the loss of it being an incredible loss for us as humans. When I think about, like, leper colonies and things like that, just being outed into… exiled, kind of.

**JR:** Yeah.

**LFW:** But I also find that really interesting as writers. We have to feel things. And I think that's what, in the interview that you did with Helena, I think that's what she was saying is we can't put on armor to protect ourselves from criticisms and hurt, but we also have to actively feel, umm… [pause] what is happening within us and around us in order to produce.

**JR:** Yeah, if you're not in touch with — I mean, think about so many of our metaphors, for… they are touch metaphors. You know, even to be in touch, or to feel. But if we're not in touch, if we're not vulnerable… then how can we even connect enough to write?

**LFW:** Yeah, Andy Crouch has a really — I tell everyone about it because

it's so, so smart — he talks about the four quadrants in his book Strong and Weak. And he basically makes the argument that you can't have human flourishing unless you have both authority and vulnerability. And that means not only you as a minister, you as a speaker, you as a teacher, you as a writer, um, you as a marginalized person — whoever you are, you have to have both authority and vulnerability in order to flourish and to help those around you flourish. And I think that — when I think about writing, when I think about being embodied, when I think about touching and feeling, I think, man, that's you sort of getting in touch with that vulnerable side. 'Cause it is *really* vulnerable to be touched, and it's vulnerable to touch.

**JR:** Yeah.

**LFW:** And, um… so that's — 'cause I think so many of us are just prone to sort of walk around authoritatively, and speak and teach and write authoritatively. But we also have to be vulnerable.

**JR:** Yeah, that's a… that's a great insight. And… do… [pause] Okay, so this idea of vulnerability and authority, um…

**LFW:** Hmm… that's all Andy Crouch, not me.

**JR:** Sure, yeah, I get that. But it sounds like you've done some thinking on that, so I just wanna pursue that a little bit further.

**LFW:** Yeah… yeah.

**JR:** And I guess… do you… is there a way… do you ever run across writing or writers that are too vulnerable and insufficiently authoritative?

**LFW:** Yeah, that's a really good question. I think that, um… I think in some ways we all have moments where we're too authoritative and not vulnerable enough, and too vulnerable and not authoritative enough. Or don't carry with us the authority that we need to carry. Andy also talks

about manipulative authority, so there's a — manipulative vulnerability — so the kind of vulnerability that just aims to make people feel something without actually accomplishing — resulting in real fruitfulness. So I think that both authority and vulnerability can be wielded as weapons maybe?

**JR:** Uh huh, yeah.

**LFW:** In a lot of ways. So I think as Christians… both embodied people who can feel brokenness and feel vulnerability, but who have also been given all authority in heaven and earth, I think that one of the jobs we have as Christians is to learn to carry both of those things carefully and in tandem and equally in some ways. We have to work to carry them equally. And I think anytime they get off balance — and this is what Andy talks about — that's when they lead to suffering and exploitation and all manner of sin against ourselves and against others.

**JR:** Hmm. Yeah. Great, and I think when we speak of authority, that's also using that authority, that power, for good rather than for… self-interested things.

**LFW:** Yeah.

**JR:** Which again, it's hard to use that authority and power for good if there's no vulnerability mixed in with it. You know, it's easy to mistreat people when you don't feel pain.

**LFW:** Yeah. I think that's the thing that surprised me so much when I was writing the book, was how vulnerable that Christ made himself. And I'm the same. Like, for instance, when he was in the house of the Pharisee and Mary came and washed his feet, I just think man, what a situation in which he could have had some terrible, awful gossip said about him. And that he made himself vulnerable. I mean, she was making herself vulnerable in washing his feet, but he made himself vulnerable too. And I think that's so — we miss that, I think, a lot with Jesus, is, um… sort of his — it wasn't a risk 'cause he's God, but the risk that he carried by becoming embodied,

and um… walking among people, and being touched and handled and… sinfully in some ways, and righteously in some ways.

**JR:** Yeah, yeah… the um, that's what makes — from what I understand, that's what makes Christianity unique among world religions, is a vulnerable god.

**LFW:** Yeah.

**JR:** And I think that's… again, this is all… I always say writing's about so much more than writing. I think this is one of those places where theology has a direct bearing on the way we approach our writing.

**LFW:** Yeah.

**JR:** That's great stuff. You had mentioned — we both mentioned my conversation with Helena earlier, and one thing that Helena had said was that when you, um… [pause] Well, we talked about being thick-skinned and being thin-skinned, and I've… [chuckles] I've been very often told writers need to be a little more thick-skinned and be not so sensitive. And Helena's point is no, the sensitivity is what makes you able to do the work. And that if you wrap a thick hide around somebody who's gift is based on a sensitivity to the world, then you're destroying something that's important. [pause] And that seems relevant to what you're doing in your book.

**LFW:** Yeah, I think I might carry that a *little* bit farther and say that I think we have to be thin-skinned in the *act* of creating art. So in the writing, in the songwriting, in the art making, we have to be thin-skinned. We have to, sort of, you know, carry that vulnerability very close to us. But I think it's also true what you're saying. We do need to have thick skin when it comes to critique or criticism, and um… and recognizing that we cannot please everyone. And also, like sometimes we need really good feedback from people.

**JR:** Yeah.

**LFW:** Especially people who love us. And also sometimes from people who don't know us at all. Because I think that we need to think about how our art is bearing weight on the world. Not just on the audience that we have in mind or the people we wanna reach, but how is our art bearing weight on the world at large among people that we're not — we *don't* know, and we're not familiar with their story. Um… and so there does need to be a measure of — and I don't know that thick-skinned would be the word I would use — I think there does need to be a measure of resilience maybe?

**JR:** Yeah.

**LFW:** Um… in hearing feedback and critique and things like that. Because we want to grow. We never wanna believe that our art is sort of the pinnacle or the best or the, um…

**JR:** Yeah. Right.

**LFW:** We want to be people who are being formed. We are the clay, we are not the potter, and so we wanna be formed and molded into more like Christ. And that's gonna take sometimes critique that is hard to hear.

**JR:** Yeah, yeah. I mean I guess probably, to… in we're talking about… um, to say… sort of using the same word to mean two different things. In other words, being, uh, being thin-skinned or sensitive as an observer certainly doesn't preclude being thick-skinned or tough when it comes to receiving criticism, right?

**LFW:** Yeah. Mmhm.

**JR:** Um… that's good. So have you ever received criticism from somebody who doesn't know you that you benefitted from?

**LFW:** [pause] I've never received criticism.

**JR:** Uh huh…

**LFW:** I'm just kidding. [laughs] Ummmm… from someone I didn't know?

**JR:** Yeah, for something that you've written? I mean, you've published a lot of articles that have had a lot of readers.

**LFW:** Yeah. I mean, I ton, I would say. I think that, um… I think that I have a very small world. I live in a, on purpose, I live in a very small world. I want to have a small life. A lot of the feedback I get is from people who don't really — and I want to stay soft to, um, what they have to say and what their story is and what their experiences are apart from my writing, but also the way things bear on them in my writing. I'm thinking about a piece that I wrote, probably ten years ago.

So, I'm a child of divorce. My parents are divorced, and I… that really, um… radically formed my brain and my life and my loves and my fears in a myriad of ways. And so I wrote an article probably ten years ago just on being a child of divorce and how painful that was. And I, in that article, begged, you know, a parent who might be considering divorce to consider their children. And ten years later I'm now married to a man who walked through a divorce. And hopefully in ten years I've also grown and suffered and matured a lot more, and seen how complicated divorce can be for an adult and for a parent who's going through that.

And I wrote something recently around this idea, and someone messaged me and said, you know, you wrote that article ten years ago, and it really hurt. It was really painful for me to read, and um… and I'm grateful that, you know, that you've written this article today. But it just got me thinking, man, I just wanna be so aware that what I'm writing today, I'm writing from a small sort of bubble of information and suffering and experience. And so I think its made me — in some ways it's made me a lot quieter than I used

to be in terms of writing. I think I used to sort of publish anywhere that would publish me. And these days I'm a *lot* more picky about where I publish and what I publish and where I write. And a lot of that is because I just find that I wanna care for the reader in a way that I didn't care as much ten years ago.

**JR:** And so, um… how does… help me understand why being more choosy about where you publish… play that out for me. How is that, how does that… um… make the connection for me between those things. Loving your reader more and being more careful about where you publish.

**LFW:** Yeah, I think, you know, ten years ago I was just like… I'll write for anyone. I don't care if you pay me, I don't care what else is on your site. I don't care what other, what else your message is. I just think I'm a lot more careful about what is this group or this publication known for?

**JR:** Uh huh. I see.

**LFW:** Who are their readers? What's their worldview? I'm just more careful about that, because I know that we are sort of… we're known by the people we keep company with.

**JR:** Yeah, that's true. Yeah.

**LFW:** Yeah. So I just wanna be careful about that.

**JR:** Yeah. Uh… you've been blogging since, what, the year 2000? Is that right?

**LFW:** That is right, yeah. Yeah.

**JR:** That is wild! That's twenty years.

**LFW:** Yeah. It is kinda crazy when I think about it, yeah.

**JR:** And… so, what has changed about blogging in twenty years?

**LFW:** That's a really good question. I think that five years ago, I would've said everything had changed about blogging. And I think, you know, that's when everyone was saying is blogging dead? And, you know, Twitter was the new — microblogging was a thing five years ago. But I think there's been a really cool resurgence in blogging recently that has really sort of delighted me. Because I think that a blog is a place where we can practice. I think of it as my living room. Um, it's a place where I can — it can be whatever I want it to be, and I can invite people in, and I can make it as warm and welcoming as I want. And yet it's also a place where I practice my writing. And it's been a place where I've practiced my writing for a really long time. Sometimes with no readers, sometimes with many readers. And so it's just kind of in process that way.

**JR:** Mmhm.

**LFW:** But I feel excited, I think, about the future of blogging — I don't know how long the future will be, of blogging. But I feel excited about it being a place where those who will stick with it, um… can really just sort of practice their skills.

**JR:** Yeah. Do you, um… do you get as many comments on your blog as you did, say, ten years ago?

**LFW:** Uh, I don't and here's why. I shut down comments! [laughs]

**JR:** Oh okay! I guess that's why — that would cause fewer comments.

**LFW:** Yeah, yeah. So I found that, um — and you know, everyone can land in a different place here, and this is where I've chosen to land. I found that a lot of comments on blogs were… they were… they were sort of the top of the conversation, but they weren't a real conversation.

**JR:** Huh.

**LFW:** And I wanted as much as possible for someone to read something on Sayable and then be sort of contemplative about it instead of just needing to comment on it and move past it. I wanted them to think about it and perhaps bring it back into their community and talk about it with their people instead of — cause I think sometimes commenting can be a way of sort of closing that chapter and moving on to the next thing.

**JR:** Hmm.

**LFW:** And so that was kind of the way — the reason that I shut it down. And I still have emails open. People can email me. But generally I don't— I can't respond to every email. And so I… that's been a really good move for me. It's also been a very healthy move for me just in terms of protecting my own sort of ego, like, space. Not letting endless compliments sort of flood.

**JR:** Yeah.

**LFW:** Like, those things are not helpful, I don't think, for any reader. And also… not making a space for people who haven't, perhaps, earned the right to critique in a way that is careful and intentional and just are trolling. So, I don't have to really have either of those two things happening.

**JR:** And how long ago did you shut off comments?

**LFW:** I don't know exactly. I think probably eight years ago?

**JR:** Uh huh.

**LFW:** Yeah.

**JR:** Interesting. Um… in your blog post that you entitled "Is Blogging

Dead?" I loved something you wrote there, and I'd like to hear you talk about it. You said, "I used to think a writer was just one who writes, but I have become less generous, I think, and believe now that a writer is one who withholds words from the public until they have gotten them right in the private. Having something to say doesn't mean it ought to be said, but saying it, like the poet said, makes it real."

[pause] I think that's uh… a remarkable passage. [pause] I… I didn't mean that as a compliment, I'm sorry. I know that you don't like compliments, so uh…

**LFW:** [laughs]

**JR:** [laughs]

**LFW:** I think that goes back to what we were kind of saying in the beginning. And that's — the poet that I was talking about there is Rilke — and so, um… [pause] I think sometimes that we need to be doing some more internal work before we bring things to the public.

**JR:** Mmhm.

**LFW:** And I'm not saying that you shouldn't be, you know, you shouldn't write in private. You should be writing in private.

**JR:** Sure.

**LFW:** But I think that we're too quick to… and I don't remember when I wrote that post. I think it was years ago. But I think that there — and there probably still is, I'm just not quite as involved in the social media back and forth blog wars that were happening — but there was just a temptation to just, like, very quickly sort of write off a blog in response to someone's decision. And I think that still happens acutally, a lot. And I just think we need to be thinking about things a lot more, considering the views of other people, before you publish.

**JR:** Yeah. Yeah. Just because something's true doesn't mean it needs to be said right now.

**LFW:** Yeah.

**JR:** And yeah, these are… that's great. Um… [pause] And then in that same passage you got back to that idea we actually — that you started with. That saying something makes it real. That by — you're putting, I guess, you're putting a stake in the ground. When you put something out there, you have put a stake in the ground, and we don't always need a stake in the ground, every day, in every situation.

**LFW:** Yeah. I actually think we need [pause] — and this might get me in trouble — far fewer stakes in the ground. I think there are some things that are absolutely true when I think about the gospel and theology. But I think as Christians we need to have far fewer stakes in the ground and bigger tables.

**JR:** Yeah, absolutely! I mean… I think if we had fewer stakes in the ground, we'd find it easier to take seriously the stakes in the ground that we do have and that we need to have.

**LFW:** Yeah. Yes. Yeah.

**JR:** Yeah. Alright umm… Lore, we need to [claps] we need to bring this in for a landing, so I'm gonna end with the question I always end with: Who are the writers who make you want to write?

**LFW:** [pause] I think Eugene Peterson is probably gonna be at the top of the list for me.

**JR:** Mmm, that's a good one…

**LFW:** Yeah. I just…

**JR:** I think you're the first person to give me that answer, and I'm surprised that you're the first one that I've gotten that from.

**LFW:** He's just so pastoral, and you can tell he's reading his work. He is not caught up in himself.

**JR:** Yeah…

**LFW:** He wants to care for his reader. And I think that — he even talks about that in I think uh, *Soulful Spirituality*. He talks about being careful writers, so full of care. Um, being shepherds of words. And I love that.

**JR:** Yeah, that's great.

**LFW:** And that makes me wanna write.

**JR:** That's great. You got anybody else?

**LFW:** [deep breath] I mean, I always have loved, you know, the old favorites. Annie Dillard and Kathleen Norris and Barbara Kingsolver's essays and people like that. Um, yeah.

**JR:** Yeah. Have you read *Acedia and Me* by Kathleen Norris?

**LFW:** Yes!

**JR:** Isn't that great? Isn't that a great book?

**LFW:** Man, I… that book was very powerful for me at a particular period in my life. And um… yeah. I love that book.

**JR:** I read it when I was in the throes of acedia, and I read it when I was

not in the throes of acedia, and it was like… it was kinda like two different books, and it was great both times.

**LFW:** I should do that again. I read it in the throes of acedia, so I probably need to re-read it outside of that.

(THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

**JR:** It's a— yeah, what a great book. Alright, Lore. Thanks so much for being here.

**LFW:** Thank you for having me.

**JR:** And uh, it's been good to talk to ya, and I hope we can do this again sometime.

**LFW:** Thank you.

**JR:** Alright, see ya later.

(THEME MUSIC)

**DREW MILLER:** The Rabbit Room is partnered with Lipscomb University to make this podcast possible. Lipscomb has graciously given us access to their recording studio in the Center for Entertainment and Arts Building. We're so grateful for their sponsorship, their encouragement, and the good work they do in Nashville.

Special shout-out as well to Jess Ray for letting us use her song "Too Good" as part of this podcast. Visit jessraymusic.com to hear more of her beautiful songs.

**JR:** The Habit Membership is a library of resources for writers by me, Jonathan Rogers. More importantly, The Habit is a hub of community where like-minded writers gather to discuss their work and give each other

a little more courage. Find out more at TheHabit.co.

**DM:** This podcast was produced by The Rabbit Room, where art nourishes community and community nourishes art. All our podcasts are made possible by the generous support of our members. To learn more about us, visit rabbitroom.com, and to become a member, rabbitroom.com/donate.

(THEME MUSIC OUT)

**DM:** Translating the Bible requires a delicate blend of accuracy and readability. The Christian Standard Bible pursues that blend, upholding fidelity to the original languages and presenting Scripture compellingly for our modern English context. Accurate. Readable. Sharable. The Christian Standard Bible. Visit csbible.com/rabbitroom to learn more. That's csbible.com/rabbitroom.