

Grit 'n' Grace: Good Girls Breaking Bad Rules

Episode #172: Embracing Christmas Disappointment

Cheri: Alright, let us start this off by talking about our Christmas regrets. Do you have any regrets from past holiday seasons or Christmases?

Amy: I think the big regret for me is just letting holidays in general rush past me these days. And Christmas, in particular, because there's so much already on our calendar, it's just the natural thing to have happen, and yet I don't want to let it happen. I think there are ways to mark the days so that we can at least be paying attention even if they go by fast. And I want to do that better this year. Um, one of the things that I miss in my particular denomination – we don't really mark the Christian calendar well.

Cheri: Mmm.

Amy: And there are denominations that do. So I was like – well, I can always do field trips to other churches to get that –

Cheri: Oooh!

Amy: – if that's what I feel like my soul needs, you know. And how interesting and fun would that be?

Cheri: I love that idea. In fact, I was even just thinking to myself as we were preparing to record here, "I miss the grandeur of a church with an organ." And I was like "I need to just seek out a local church that's doing a high church Christmas concert, complete with Handel's Messiah," because I love being able to stand when I hear the opening bars. I

don't want to do that every day of the Christmas season, but I'd like to do it at least once.

Amy: I'm with you.

Cheri: I like that idea.

Amy: Do you have any Christmas regrets that you want to amend this year?

Cheri: No, I have no regrets whatsoever, Amy.

[Both laugh]

Amy: I'm so lucky that I get to hang out with you.

Cheri: [Laughs] Yeah. And all of our listeners, my perfection can rub off on them. Yeah, my denial can rub off on everybody.

Amy: [Laughs]

Cheri: My biggest regret – and we'll talk more about this as we go along – because I think Kathi absolutely blew the doors off, and the socks off, and we're still trying to figure out which end is up after Hurricane Kathi –

[Both laugh]

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– blew through last week.

Amy: Well, we were her first interview for the planner and she had a whole slew of ‘em after us and I’m just like I feel sorry for them. Like, we got the best.

Cheri: We did. We absolutely did. But you know, it won’t be any surprise to our listeners that my biggest regret is letting the ghost of Christmas past rule and ruin my Christmas present. Whether it is past traditions, or past pains, or past – I, like, I have regrets about my regrets! How sad is that? How like a still-in-recovery perfectionist is that? I can’t let go of my regrets. I have to hang on to them and regret them all over again.

Amy: That becomes quite a mountain!

[Both laugh]

Cheri: Well, this is Cheri Gregory –

Amy: – and I’m Amy Carroll –

Cheri: – and you’re listening to Grit ‘n’ Grace: Good Girls Breaking Bad Rules, the podcast that equips you to lose who you’re not, love who you are, and live your one life well.

Amy: Today we’re processing what the mountain of what we learned from Kathi Lipp, author of *The Christmas Project Planner*.

Cheri: One of the big mic drops for me that may not, maybe all of our listeners are going to roll their eyes at this, but when she said, “Christmas is new every year.” I was like, “Why did no one tell me this?”

[Both laugh]

Amy: Well, I mean it is a realization! And I think because primarily in American culture we’ve let most tradition go –

Cheri: Yeah.

Amy: – but Christmas is one of those times that we cling to tradition, and I do think it’s ‘cause our souls long for it. But how can we keep the traditions that serve our souls and our families well, and then make things new?

Cheri: It was so mind-blowing to think, “Oh, well, we’re new, we might be in a different job stage or life stage or maybe we’ve added somebody to the family or maybe there’s somebody who’s no longer with us,” and, of course, the recovering perfectionist part of my brain is like “There’s one right way.” and I can never seem to get back to it or recreate it or whatever it might be, so I end up spending the entire holiday season feeling like a failure. And you wanna guess how fun it is for my family to be hanging around somebody who, like, always struggles with feeling like a failure and then that just gets like amped up like tenfold or twentyfold, you know, from like October through December? You wanna guess how much fun that is for them?

[Both laugh]

Amy: Yeah we gotta reform this so that we can have fun and our people have fun. And I’m in the same boat. And I am in a very new season as Kathi pointed out –

Cheri: Mmm.

Amy: – this year because suddenly there’s an in-law situation. And it is such a happy situation! So I love my new daughter-in-law and I love her family! Like, we had so much fun at the wedding I cannot even tell you, and her family’s godly and fun and just incredible people, so. But despite the fact that we have all these amazing people involved, you know, just trying to figure out, “What is this gonna look like?” And then there are – there’s extended family – my children still have grandparents involved –

Cheri: Sure.

Amy: – so it’s not just the immediate family, but then it’s grandparents... man, it’s complicated.

Cheri: Alright, well that leads us beautifully – because I want you to unpack something that you said to Kathi. We had asked her “Well what if we disappoint someone?” and she gave us this startling response, as only Kathi Lipp can do, she said, “Plan on it!” And then, in case we hadn’t gotten it she was like, “Plan on disappointing people!” And then she said a bunch of other things and you said that was the most powerful permission she could have given all of us. So unpack that for me and for our listeners. Why was that such a powerful permission for you?

Amy: Well, I just had this moment that felt like pure freedom when she said that. You know, several years ago we were in a family situation and there was a disgruntled person, and this person tends to be the disgruntled person, and Anson said to me – he looked at me and said, “You can’t choose joy for other people, mom.” Choose joy has become kind of our family motto and sometimes we’re nice about it, and sometimes we’re not. Sometimes it comes out like CHOOSE JOY!

[Both laugh]

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Cheri: I love the honesty.

[Both laugh]

Cheri: CHOOSE JOY OR I'LL CHOOSE IT FOR YOU!

Amy: Exactly!

Cheri: And you'll be happy about it!

Amy: But most of the time we try to tell ourselves to choose joy. But in that moment when he said, "Mom, you can't choose joy for other people," it was the same kind of feeling that I had when Kathi said, "Plan on disappointing people." You know, we can only choose joy for ourselves. That's it. You know, I think that we do want to serve our people and love our people, but there are just some boundaries, and like she pointed out, there are these chronically disappointed people who would be disappointed if they weren't disappointed! And so, just let go of it.

Cheri: I love it. Well, and I had this huge realization while we were talking that, wow, I have always kept myself – like, my own enjoyment and my own joy in the holidays, I have figured out how bad the mood is of the person in the worst mood, and then dialed myself down to match them, and then tried to raise them up so that I was then allowed to feel better, enjoy myself more, and – part of it, I think there probably was a sort of healthy desire to be helpful or whatever –

Amy: Sure!

Cheri: – but the fact that I allowed myself to stay so stuck along with them and then we're back to that 'c' word, trying to literally control them and get them to feel better so I could feel better? That part falls under the meddling category yet again.

But you know, I'm just even thinking about it and trying to imagine how I can actually be genuinely happy in the presence of somebody who is genuinely miserable and I'm like, "Can I take lessons somewhere on this?" 'cause it just feels so foreign, like, if they're that upset how dare I, in the next breath, express genuine joy? To me, it would feel like I'm contradicting them or being dismissive of them or failing to empathize with them and yet this is boundaries. It says they get to be themselves, and I get to be myself. And I'm a separate person. I'm not in a relationship where they shove all their – the plate of trash, I don't have to hold on to it during the holidays because I think those plates of trash are probably bigger and heaped higher during the holidays.

Amy: Oh, that's really true.

Oh! You know, it literally is, when we start to look at if we're going to put happiness on a balance, on a scale here, most of the time there is that one person that loves to be miserable but there are so many happy people around us. You know, I experienced this on Fourth of July this year, and I'm going to try to take this lesson into Christmas.

Cheri: Do tell.

Amy: Fourth of July I was so excited. Barry had initiated it, he had invited my whole extended family over. Well, my extended family is extensive and getting more extensive all the time because I have a niece who has started having babies so I am a great aunt – I like to emphasize great, I'm a *great* aunt –

[Both laugh]

Amy: – and my brother has six children, so marriages are starting to happen and you know, babies, and so it's getting bigger all the time. And we have a pretty small house.

But we added on a deck and it's an amazing deck, and I love it. So it kind of expands our house, unless it's raining.

Cheri: Oh no.

Amy: So on Fourth of July we were gonna have seventeen people in my house. Which, you know, is – there is really not enough room for seventeen people in my house.

Cheri: Some of them would have been sitting on the stairs.

Amy: Exactly. And, um, but I was like, “We’ve got the deck.” Except that it was scheduled to rain. And I was like, “It’s ok. We’ve got the canopy. We’ll put the canopy on the deck.” Well, ok. It wasn’t just a little rain, Cheri Gregory, it was the biggest storm you have ever seen. So, like, right as everyone was supposed to arrive, huge storm, tons of wind, rain blowing over the canopy, I mean, the whole nine yards. And then the power went out.

Cheri: Noooooooooo!

Amy: And it stayed out the whole time the seventeen people were at my house.

Cheri: Nooooooooooooo! That’s just wrong!

Amy: We made do. We put the garage door up. We set tables in the garage, and you know – everybody else had a really grand time. And that speaks so well – this is why I’m talking about happy people. My mother said, “It was so much fun, Amy!” and I said, “That’s because my family is awesome.”

Cheri: But I'm over here, and I still haven't taken a breath yet!

Amy: Well, and you know what, I've done so well with expectations, but I did not have a good time at all. Because I had those expectations of, "We'll use the deck" and "It will be fun" and "It will be fine" and then I stepped on a sparkler in my bare feet, I mean the whole day was like – but what I had to do in that moment, even though I felt unhappy in this situation, is I focused on the happy people. And there were lots of them around me. So I think that's something that we can do, is we can decide that we're gonna focus on the happy people.

Cheri: I love that idea. Because my problem is when I'm really feeling grinchy, I focus on the happy people because I'm so mad at them. It's like, "How dare you be happy in the face of my misery?"

Amy: [Laughs]

Cheri: So you're suggesting that we focus on them not as the target but as someone to emulate or at least uplift our conversation. I like that. I like that a lot.

Amy: Yes. Yes.

Cheri: Alright. Well, another thing Kathi said that was just great as she was talking about expectations, which we talk about so much around here, she said, "Let's make the invisible visible." And you said you were gonna go right out and do that because you actually had a family dinner coming up. So, here we have responsibility Amy who's already been an over-achiever and she has done this, so you're going to tell us all about it and then we as listeners are going to learn from your success, and I'm going to be planning to do this and I'll report back. So tell us what you did.

Amy: Well, my family was actually having dinner: both of my sons, my daughter-in-law, Barry and I – were gonna be together for the one and only time until Christmas. So it was like, “Oh my goodness, I get to put this into action tonight.” Action Amy! I was just so happy to have a plan. So, I wrote stuff down when we were talking to Kathi, and I asked questions at dinner. And so, okay, Cheri, I just wanna give you a chance. Guess what made the list. Like, really, guess.

Cheri: Ok, the list of what people really need for it to be Christmas.

Amy: Really need.

Cheri: They need mom to be a maniac about decorations.

Amy: [Laughs]

Amy: No.

Cheri: Darn. I’m sorry. I’m team Amy.

Amy: [Laughs]

Cheri: Ok, it probably doesn’t involve a ton of home-cooked food, because that’s not your forte anyway.

Amy: Yeah, that made me laugh, because – well, yes, one thing made it onto the list.

Cheri: Ok, the one thing you don’t tend to burn. Do tell. Fill us in.

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Amy: Exactly! Exactly. Ok. So seriously, there's dead silence at the table. And Nolan, my youngest, goes, "Oh! I know. I really want a cinnamon candle."

Cheri: [Laughs]

Amy: And I was like, "What?" He goes, "You know that one that you have that smells so good that you light every year? I want the cinnamon candle." I was like, "Ok. I'm pretty sure I can do that. Next?" Look, here's the list. Here's the entire Carroll list. A cinnamon candle, pumpkin bread – which is also my favorite so I'm willing to make it – and watching the movie *Elf*. Oh, and at one point Nolan did come back around and go, "Oh mom, and we really – you know, Jesus should be on the list."

Cheri: I was about to ask "What? You mean you're not reading the Christmas story aloud together?" I'm glad that your son, you know, remembered what's really important here.

Amy: Brought us back around. So Jesus is the top of the list, followed closely by a cinnamon candle, pumpkin bread, and watching the movie *Elf*. That is it. That is all that's on the Carroll Christmas list.

Cheri: Ok but here's the big question: how do you feel about this?

Amy: Are you kidding? Like, free and happy, skippy light.

Cheri: Alright! So you don't feel disappointed like, you've lived a lie all these years or anything. This is freedom. Ok.

Amy: A Christmas candle? Oh my heavens.

Cheri: [Laughs]

Amy: How about you? What's happening with your family?

Cheri: Here's my prediction. When we have our next family meeting. I'm just gonna predict we need to read *The Greatest Christmas Pageant Ever* or *Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, I can never remember the title, because we do that every year. I'm gonna want to pick a few Christmas movies – *Miracle on 34th Street*, *White Christmas*, we have just, you know, a shortlist – Annemarie, I predict, is gonna wanna decorate early, and she's gonna want me not to complain while we're decorating, and she's gonna want people to decorate with her because she thinks that's fun to do together. And I think Jonathon's going to be a toss-up between the food and minimal travel. But of course, they go together because if we don't travel then we're home and we can cook our favorite foods, his favorite foods, in our own kitchen. But I am –

Amy: And he cooks!

Cheri: He does.

Amy: How awesome is that?

Cheri: Oh, it's amazing.

Cheri: And I'm gonna propose a really daring idea, it's one I've already talked to about with Annemarie, and we're gonna propose a Christmas shopping spree where she teams up with Daniel and I team up with Jonathon, and we buy like \$10 gifts for each other, because we – I can't remember when we've ever actually exchanged Christmas gifts as a family. So we thought it could be really fun to make this kind of like a field trip, like, what can you find for \$10 or less that actually that you can maybe tell a little story with, it could be fun, it could be funny, it could be touching, it could be useful, whatever. And we also decided that if the menfolk say no – because they're free to do that, that's a boundary – she and I will go and we will still have fun and do something like that together. Because we just thought it was a fun idea.

Amy: And then you'll spend the \$10 on yourself the way you want. Bonus!

Cheri: Yes, and then we'll wrap it and tell them that that was their gift to us. Oh absolutely. Because we're both control freaks, so. Anyways. I will absolutely report back on this.

Alright, so the last thing that we'll talk about here is – Kathi talked about elf or grinch, you get to choose, and so that's what kind of what we've been talking about today is really choosing, for me especially, I need to make very conscious choices to move away from the grinchiness and more toward that happy elf-ness. You have that a little bit more – I won't say naturally, you've got that more well-developed, you've practiced it for longer – but she talked about the holiday mission statement which is about what you will not do, more about what you will not do, so we thought we'd go ahead and wrap up here with one thing we are gonna do and one thing we are not going to do for this holiday season. What's on your do and do not list?

Amy: Well on the do list I'm gonna add this, this is my item on the Carroll family Christmas list, is do take a ride to look at Christmas lights with the best hot chocolate recipe I can find.

Cheri: Ooh, I like that.

Amy: And I am not going to let Christmas expectations get out of control this year. And to remember I have a very easy family. My word! What a pitiful Christmas list. I mean wonderful Christmas list.

[Both laugh]

Amy: Cheri, how about you?

Cheri: Oh, my gosh, I love that so much. You know, one of the things I do need to do is – and this may sound horrifying to some, but it’s what works for me – I just need to block out time every day, October, November, December, and just say this is my holiday, whether it’s planning time or executing time – not like executing the people, but executing the plan, you know –

Amy: [Laughs]

Cheri: – because part of the problem is I try to squeeze it in around the edges of an already busy life. My life doesn’t slow down a whole lot November and December. And so, I need to pull some things off the calendar and block out time, and – let’s pretend it’s an hour – for that hour I go gung-ho whether it’s bringing in the ornaments or ordering one thing online. Whatever it might be. Because trying to just fit it in in the corners and the cracks hasn’t worked, and it makes me feel grumpy and it makes me feel like a failure, whereas if I schedule it in, that means it’s a priority and that means it’ll get done, and it’ll snowball. Like, as I start getting a few things done, I’ll start feeling good about it, and then I’ll really – and some days it may just be push play on Christmas music, like that may be the only thing for the day, but it’ll still help me be moving in that direction. And my thing not to do is I’m not going to give up before it even starts because that has been my M.O. for way too many years.

So what’s the scripture that you’ve paired with these episodes?

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Amy: Well, I'm taking Nolan's advice, and we're going to put Jesus first here. John 1:5, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." So, of course, this scripture is talking about Jesus, the light of the world, coming into the world. But I thought, if we take Jesus' light, He says He's in us, into all these things, these conversations, this planning, that He is the light in the darkness, and so He can dispel a lot of this angst and these crazy expectations that we've had.

Cheri: And you know what I feel myself doing just listening to you? I feel myself exhaling. That is so good.

So what's the bad rule that we're breaking here?

Amy: Holidays get overtaken by expectations every time.

Cheri: Hmmm. Yep. I have felt that to be true.

So what's the truth, what's the fact we can focus on instead?

Amy: We can let truth and light take center stage during the holidays.

You know, and this is really the grit for me, is the expectations just get – every year, I go in saying, "I'm not going to let my expectations get out of control." Well, guess what.

[Both laugh]

Amy: Most years, they end up at center stage instead of truth and light. And so this year, hold my feet to the fire, Cheri. Truth and light are center stage.

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Cheri: I love it. Well then, same thing for me, almost, in terms of the grace. I have tended to – for the holidays, to be just this time of guilt for me because of all those regrets and the regretting the regrets and the regrets of the regrets of the regrets and, you know, that whole vicious cycle, and so I'm just thinking that when Kathi said Christmas is new every year, it's true in more ways than one. Grace says that I get to start over. This year can be a completely new experience. And I don't have to think about the past. I don't have to make up for the past. Nobody else has to make up for the past, that I can accept God's grace and I can extend it to others. And this holiday can be all about truth and light in a whole new way.

Amy: Beautifully said.

Cheri: We hope you've enjoyed episode 172 of Grit'n'Grace: Good Girls Breaking Bad Rules.

Amy: Head on over to our website, gritnegracegirls.com/episode172. There you'll find this week's transcript, our Digging Deeper Devotional, and links to Kathi's website and the Christmas Project Planner.

Cheri: We'll be continuing this conversation in the Grit'n'Grace Girls Facebook group. You can find the link on our website or just search Facebook for Grit'n'Grace Girls and you'll find us.

Amy: Next week we'll be talking with Trisha Goyer, author of *The Grumble-Free Year*.

Cheri: For today, grow your grit. Embrace God's grace. And when you run across a bad rule, you know what to do. Go right on ahead and ...

Amy: 'n' Cheri: Break it!