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Mon, 2/7 5:18PM • 25:20

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

theology, church, Christ, theologian, university, God, people, community, classes, Graceland, year, seminary, congregations, thought, Charmaine, Christianity, Tony, grew, teach, introducing

SPEAKERS

Tony Chvala-Smith, Carla Long, Katie Langston, Josh Mangelson, Charmaine Chvala-Smith

Katie Langston 00:13

You're listening to an extra shot episode on the Project Zion Podcast, a shorter episode that lets you get your project Zion fix in between our full-length episodes. It might be shorter timewise but hopefully not in content. So regardless of the temperature at which you prefer your caffeine, sit back, and enjoy this extra shot.

Josh Mangelson 00:34

The music has been provided by Ben Howington you can find his music at mormonguitar.com.

Carla Long 01:07

Hi, my name is Carla Long, and I'm bringing you a short and extra shot of the Project Zion Podcast. Today, I'm introducing you to Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith. I'm excited to introduce you to them and I know that you will love them as much as I do after hearing more. Tony and Charmaine, welcome. (Hi, Carla.) So, Tony and Charmaine, tell us more about yourself. Where did you grow up? Where'd you come from?

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:34

I grew up in Central Michigan. I've had family there since the 1870s. So, we're longtime Michigan people. My father is a retired factory worker. My mother is a retired nursing home cook. I encountered Community of Christ when I was 18 years old and discovered that I had a little bit of family history in it. We had actually grown-up Methodist. When I was in junior high, we stopped going to church. When I discovered Community of Christ, I became interested as an 18-year-old, and I've been active since then.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:11

I'm originally from Saskatchewan, in Western Canada, and grew up on a farm about 10 miles out of North Battleford. I'm one of seven children. My mum was a church member, RLDS at the time, but we lived about 100 miles away from the nearest congregation. So, for me, church was one week of youth

camp every summer, and was the thing that not only me, but all of my siblings looked forward to. It was a week away from all the hard labor of being on a farm and a place where you didn't have to do dishes every meal and where, for me, I think for the others as well, God became real. This was no longer just having our mom teach the pre-baptismal classes or tell us about the church, or its history. This was the time when God's realness met us. Camp was the highlight of the year for all of us and you can tell that because when we would be doing some particularly onerous tasks on the farm, whether it was picking rocks in the spring, or baling in the summer, we would, on our ways out to the field and on the way back, we would be singing camp songs. Somehow that brought joy in the midst of some really difficult times. So, my early beginning in the church was one week of camp every summer and I still think that in some ways, I saw the church at its best. As a young adult, actually, my last year of high school, I was very prayerful about what was it I could do for God. For the year after graduating from grade 12, I traveled with a seventy on a youth missionary team for a year. That brought me into the realities of church life and congregational life like I had not ever been exposed to before. It brought some new understanding and realism to my understandings of the church and was an amazing experience. And so That's my beginning, feeling even from that time in grade 12 that if I would try to be attuned to it, that there were things I could do for God. So, it's a good start.

Carla Long 04:55

It is a good start. Thanks. So, it sounds like you both came from humble beginnings in some ways. What do you do now? For the church and for Graceland University? Can you explain what you are doing at this moment?

Tony Chvala-Smith 05:10

In the past year we've switched employment from being full-time Community of Christ, where we had been scripture and theology specialists since 2006, and before that, from 1996 to 2006, had been serving in a role called theologian in residence role that we shared. In November we switched to full-time employment with Community of Christ Seminary, which is graduate school connected to Graceland University, the churches' college. So, I am an assistant professor of theology and scripture at Community of Christ Seminary, and I hold a chair called Paul E. Morton Seminary Chair in Religion. We teach graduate classes and undergraduate classes, but we still have a part-time role with Community of Christ. We still are available as consultants and still have an office in headquarters and still have a variety of things that we do for the church.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 06:13

Yeah, in our classroom times, both in undergrad at Graceland and in seminary, I typically am either working behind the scenes or in an assistant role. At the seminary I'm the chaplain and also the events coordinator for our focus weeks which are face-to-face sessions that happen with several of our classes here in Independence. I also work with the Spiritual Formation Team and have quite a bit of focus with the spiritual formation and companioning program. We have two retreats a year and they take an awful lot of coordinating and ongoing work with the participants. So, that's another big part of what I do. Also, I'm a spiritual director. I do spiritual direction with a number of people. And I'm also an evangelist in Community of Christ. I'm also working with, I think, presently, four or five people in preparation for their evangelist blessing. So, we keep pretty busy. We also teach classes throughout the church, sometimes we have weekend classes, sometimes we weeklong classes on scripture, on history of Community of Christ, and sometimes other classes that have a narrower theological perspective or on particular

books of the Bible, depending on what different jurisdictions might want us to come in and teach. So those are also things that we do some once or twice a month throughout the year. So, we get to travel. We get to be with people. We usually do one or two camps or reunions each summer. We have more exposure to youth and young adults, as well. We're very blessed to get to do all the different things we do.

Carla Long 08:27

It sounds like you both have a pretty big responsibility when it comes to education, education of young adults at Graceland University and your undergrad classes and education for our working ministers and non-working ministers in the Community of Christ Seminary. So how did you get from, like I said before, your humble beginnings of growing up Methodist and growing up on a farm far away from any RLDS/Community of Christ congregation? How did you get from there to where you are now?

Tony Chvala-Smith 08:59

Well, I guess in my immediate family, I was the first person to go to university. My family on both sides are working class people. My mother's parents were farmers. My father's parents were, he was a factory worker, and she was a waitress in a hotel. So, college wasn't always part of the plan back in the 1970s. University education was fairly inexpensive and so it was something that I kind of stumbled into. I would say that when I started university, I was not really a practicing Christian. I had not discovered this church yet and I was going to university to become a lawyer. The reason I was going to become a lawyer was my dad had tried to talk me into this because I had a hunting habit and I remember him saying to me, you know, big game hunting around the world is an expensive hobby. So, what do you think about law? And I said, Yeah, sure, why not?

Carla Long 10:14

And so, you wanted to become a lawyer so that you could support your hunting habit.

Tony Chvala-Smith 10:18

Yeah, pretty much, pretty much. And so, when I started university, that was my goal, but I had a series of very important spiritual transformations in that first year of university study. One of them was that I discovered that Jesus Christ was actually real, and that by committing myself to him, my life looked and felt different. That happened in my first semester. About the same time, I began visiting an old high school teacher of mine whom I really didn't know was an RLDS seventy. I was going to visit him to talk about politics. I had him in high school and thought he was a great teacher and enjoyed him a lot. I knew that he knew my Grandpa Smith somehow, but I was not interested in why or how. So, I started hanging around him and he, of course, as a missionary in the RLDS church, saw me as fresh meat. And so, little by little, he began introducing me to the church and introducing me to the fact that my father was an inactive member and that my Grandpa and Grandma Smith were active members, which I didn't know even though I grew up at the same time with them, and that my great grandparents had been RLDS members, too. So that was a major change for me. I was baptized in the winter of 1975 and right away, I started experiencing this sense of divine calling in my life. I wasn't quite sure how to put words on it, but basically, what it was, was a draw towards theological study and in the 1970s, in the RLDS Church/Community of Christ, theology was still kind of a dirty word. But something in me was pulling me in that direction. Later in that year, when I had my evangelist blessing, I had this incredible experience of God confirming that I've been perceiving this right, and that God wanted me to do this.

And so, I redirected all of my undergraduate education towards preparing to go on for MDiv study afterwards and for PhD study after that. Sometimes people ask me when you first realized you wanted to be a theologian. And on reflection, I've looked back, and I remember when I was a little boy and we were active Methodists, I used to explore the woods around our home. Across the road from our house was an old, abandoned gravel pit. I used to go over there and look for fossils, which were so cool to me. Dinosaurs and fossils were cool, were cool to little kids in the 1960s, too. And this one particular Sunday, I raised my hand in Sunday school. I must have been 10 or 11, probably 10 and I asked the Sunday school teacher, "Can you tell me how dinosaurs fit into the book of Genesis?", which was followed by silence and changing the topic very quickly. So that's when I first became a theologian, when I started asking hard questions about faith, about Scripture, about how our experience of the world relates to what Christians believe to be God's revelation. That's really what theology does. It's faith seeking understanding. As a 10-year-old, I was trying to understand dinosaurs are not in Genesis, and yet, here's the empirical evidence. How do you square this? One thing led to another and then I went on. I had great teachers as an undergraduate at Central Michigan University. I went on to Princeton Theological Seminary and did my MDiv. It was during that time that Charmaine and I met and really discovered we had a shared call. Eventually, I went on to do a PhD in theology at Marquette University, which is a Roman Catholic University in Milwaukee.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 14:43

Theology, how did we get to that point? I guess, there are two things that come to mind. One of them is that my way of experiencing the world is through experience and so from that time of traveling with a seventy for a year, within a couple of years, I had a job working with youth in the Flint, Michigan area working with several congregations as a youth coordinator. For me, that was a place where theology was happening. I went to a lot of congregations, and you could really get a sense of how they saw God, how they in worship, or in youth activities, interacted with God, with Christ, with the Holy Spirit. And they were different. And just recognizing those differences really made me curious about why. Why could there be so much difference within the same denomination within 30 miles of each other? Often it's because of a strong personality who is verbalizing the faith. You'd also get to see the conflicts within congregations, and conflicts were often over ideas, over theological ideas or perceptions or beliefs. That was a way of realizing this stuff is makes a difference. It makes a difference to what kids hear and learn and how they live out their relationship with God. So that was one thing. Another thing that really impacted me was when I went to Graceland University, which is university sponsored by Community of Christ. I just went there for one year, but I remember one particular conversation that threw my whole life into turmoil and helped me realize that I needed to be concerned about my theology. [I talked to] an acquaintance about the year I had spent traveling with a seventy and then also talked about our regional administrator back in my home area, and how they're both such spiritual people. This acquaintance said, "Well, yeah, but my understanding is that they don't agree on a lot of things." Here were two people that I thought were super close to God. If I wanted to know what God thought, I just needed to listen to them. And now it's like, Oh, if they don't agree with each other, how do I know what God thinks? That really threw me into a tailspin. How will I know? In the midst of all of that anxiety, it was like the moorings on a rowboat had been cut and I was now out on the water myself and I realized, Oh, I'm going to have to figure out what my relationship is with God. I'm going to have to figure out how to know what God is saying. I'm going to have to put the oars into the water myself. That was frightening and exciting, all at the same time. I can point back to that as being one of those places,

and then meeting Tony, Mr. Theology brain, and realizing on some of our very long trips, different places that we didn't agree on things.

Carla Long 18:37

No . . .

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 18:38

I know, it's hard to believe.

Tony Chvala-Smith 18:41

And there was Charmaine's way and then there was the wrong way.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 18:46

Well, that's right. But even on things that we didn't agree on, and that we would argue about, it was often that Tony would say, "Well, what you're saying is the same as," and he would name some theologian and what they had said, and I'd go, oh,

Carla Long 19:05

I should write more of my thoughts down.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:09

It was very affirming, the idea that, yes, I could think theologically. I could articulate things theologically. I think that's probably true of almost everybody. When we are out doing classes on theology, we try to affirm that everyone is a theologian. If we've thought about how you offer prayer, that's theology if you think about what it is you're going to say. What does it mean? How does it connect with what I know about God? That's theology. It's a natural, everyday part of our lives. Most people's lives are affected by theology, whether they know or not.

Carla Long 20:01

That is really wonderful to hear. I'm sure that people would be surprised to hear that a theologian, and you Charmaine, you've studied theology yourself so much, would say that anybody can do theology. I mean, what a wonderful gift to give to people.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 20:18

Yeah, you know, it's a different place. Sometimes we think about theology as being about what you get out of books and then what you spew from there. At its deepest, I think theology is experience, is when what we know and experience of God finds words that helps to explain, helps it be transferable between people, understandable between people. I think that's sometimes a more inclusive way.

Tony Chvala-Smith 20:55

We sometimes tell church folks that, depending on which Gospel, Jesus repeats the great commandment, and it's essentially to love God with heart, with might or will, with mind, with soul. And too often theology has been simply limited to loving God with the mind. Now we should do that. Christianity is not blessed by being irrational about things. At the same time, to love God with the whole person means that you don't just use your head, use your heart, will, soul. All human faculties are

involved in loving God and theology, at its best wants to embrace all that. The greatest of Christian theologians were also preachers, practitioners of spiritual disciplines. They were bishops. They were pastors. They weren't just simply locked in universities.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 21:56

Tony, you said something earlier about Christianity is not blessed with. . .

Tony Chvala-Smith 22:00

. . . served well by, Oh, by being, served well by being irrational.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 22:06

Yeah, yeah, I wasn't quite sure what you what you meant there.

Tony Chvala-Smith 22:10

I mean, that, like in our day and age, Christianity is often represented by what I would consider really reactionary voices publicly, who, for example, want to control what's taught as science in public schools. They want to control what's taught in terms of reproductive care and rights and so on. Lots of people see Christianity as anti-science and I think that's a misrepresentation of Christianity at its best. Some of the greatest of all Christian theologians, like Augustine, or like Thomas Aquinas, were very much in tune with the best thought of their day and tried to reframe Christian faith in light of it. And so that's what I meant by Christianity is not well served by being irrational.

Carla Long 23:01

Well, thank you so much, Tony and Charmaine, for this wonderful introduction. We're gonna close down our extra and short shot of introducing you both with just one final, extra important question. You know, you've been teaching in Community of Christ for a long time, and I am fairly aware that you have had some really special students in your past. I was just wondering if there was one particular blond haired, blue-eyed, beautiful student that you thought was maybe your favorite?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 23:36

Are you thinking maybe of this student who was in one of our very first classes at Graceland?

Carla Long 23:42

I do believe I am. She was extra, extra special, I believe. And what was her name again?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 23:47

Um, let's see. Was it Melanie? No.

Carla Long

No, no, it was Carla.

Tony Chvala-Smith 23:53

Carla, you can answer your own question Carla. Mirror, mirror, on the wall!

Carla Long 24:02

As usual, I can answer my own questions. Well, Tony and Charmaine thanks again for being here and thanks for being part of Community of Christ and for doing what you do.

Josh Mangelson 24:41

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