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SPEAKERS

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

Josh Mangelson 00:22

Thanks for listening to another episode of Project Zion. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts the Restoration offers for today's world. Project Zion is sponsored by the Latter-day Seekers team from Community of Christ.

Carla Long 00:55

Hello everyone and welcome once again to the Project Zion Podcast. My name is Carla Long, and I am your host for the series Percolating on Faith. And today, we are going to talk about something that truly percolates your faith, I believe. We're gonna be talking about sex. Yes, Carla, do not insert a salt and pepper song, do not insert salt and pepper song. Anyway, sex! Let's talk about it.

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:27

Let's do.

Carla Long 01:29

Let's do. Yes, gentle and kind listeners. Today is the day you'll hear all about sex. That four-letter word that rarely gets spoken inside the hallowed walls of a church building. In other words, this ain't your mama's Sunday school lesson. Yes, I did work on that intro a little harder than I usually do. So today, we're here with Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith. Welcome back, guys.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:52

Well hello, hello!

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:53

Hi.

Carla Long 01:56

It is great to talk about sex with you.

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:56

It's great to talk about sex, anytime!

Carla Long 01:59

Anytime! And you know what, actually this is kind of a bucket list check-off for me, talking about sex with my two favorite theologians. How fun is that?

Tony Chvala-Smith 02:09

That is really, really fun, I would say!

Carla Long 02:13

It's really fun. I mean, I do have a weird bucket list. But I'm checking this off today. So wow, talking about sex with theologians. I don't know if anyone ever thought that they might be doing this. So it could be an interesting day. So guys, I'm going to start a really easy question for you. And I'm going to say, why in the world should we talk about sex in churches? What would be the point of that?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:41

The answers are multi.... There's so many of them to talk about! One of them, and this is actually something, a line, I used in a sermon yesterday, though we weren't talking about sex, is that the God that we worship, and the God that we are called by, is not just a Sunday God. Our God is an everyday and an every night God. And a God who is concerned and interested in all of who we are as human beings. And I mean that in itself is enough to say, why would we not have a whole dimension of ourself as part of the conversation about theology, part of the spiritual conversation about who we are as individuals. Back when I was working as a youth worker in Flint, Michigan, quite a number of years ago, we had a place where kids would get together on Saturday evening, in a room in one of the churches. They set up a room for the youth to get together, and we started putting together a little library there. And we had two or three pretty good books on sex and sexuality, that were written by some very progressive Christian writers. And, you know what, every Saturday night that book was not on the shelf. And there would be, you know, usually a little group of girls, sometimes with guys there as well, talking about what was in the book. And it was just such a hunger, particularly, I think, for children, youth, young adults, to say, where does this part of who I am fit into my life in the church, my life with God, my life with others. And maybe it's our puritanical background, but you know, we've had a tendency to really veer away from that, as though somehow it's not appropriate or it's too uncomfortable. But it's part of who we are, and within our world, issues of human sexuality have really emerged in the last few decades. And if we let it, that provides people within Christianity a good place to begin the conversation, or to continue the conversation about how do we let our sexual selves, that aspect of ourselves, be integrated into our whole life in Christ?

Tony Chvala-Smith 05:49

Yeah, and what I would say to that question, in addition is, first of all, at the center of Christianity is the principle, the act of incarnation of the divine word becoming flesh and blood. One of my theological mentors, the great early 20th century Anglican theologian and Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple. He says that Christianity is the most materialistic of religions, because it takes matter very seriously. And I think that's a wonderful statement. Matter, meaning our flesh and blood reality, our this-

worldly reality, is the reality that God shows us that God has claimed in Christ. And so right at the heart of Christianity is a principle which ought to have made us all along be interested in the topic of how sexuality fits in as part of our faith and our lives. So that's another reason why we should talk about this in church. I think we could also add to that: Christians have the same struggles with, issues with, sex and sexuality everybody else has. The church, the churches are not places that are strangers to sexual issues, all the way from sexual misconduct to wondering what's appropriate for a Christian to do. These questions are just there, they're part of our lived reality. So when we avoid those questions, or when we respond to them only by saying: well, you can't think about that, or talk about that, or you can't do X or Y, because the Bible says so, we're not really taking our faith seriously, we're not taking our human realities seriously. Also I might say, another reason why we need to talk about this is that all Christian traditions have inherited an older Hellenistic tradition of dualism, that is separating body from Spirit, in a way that biblical authors didn't imagine it. In both Old and New Testament, you don't have a body, you are a body. And so, what you do with your body is, you know, how you live bodily is really central to ethical thought in both Testaments. But some kinds of radical weak influences later on in Christianity tended to separate body and Spirit so much that bodies came to be seen as a problem, not as the center or the locus of our actual life. So those are a bunch of reasons between us here that we think church is the perfect place to talk about sex.

Carla Long 08:50

Yeah, it sounds like it. Um, and I was also thinking, Charmaine, you kind of touched on this when you are speaking about it, but I was kind of thinking that when we don't talk about it, that speaks really loudly as well. It turns sex into like *the other*, you know, something that's out there, something that, you know, we kind of put it on its own pedestal in some ways, and make it mysterious. And so it becomes something that is maybe even a little bit more tempting to hide, or to, you know, something that might be a little bit bad. So when we don't talk about it, that says a lot, I think.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 09:28

It does. And I think again, especially to youth and young adults, where there may be implied things you shouldn't do or you mustn't do, but that's all that's said about sexual relationships. And so there's this big gap for youth especially, where if we don't talk about it at all, then there is the sense that this doesn't matter to God. This part of who they are, God is not aware of. And so in some of those really difficult choices that youth and young adults have to make, there's often a feeling of shame or embarrassment to be prayerful about it. Because somehow, well, you shouldn't have to, you know, these aren't things that you bring to God, because no one has talked about them in relationship to God. So it puts many people in a really awkward situation that way. So yeah, lots of things, like you said. Once things are hidden, then they take on their own kind of secrecy. And whether it's in our early history of the church, or whether it's in families today, or in individual's relationships, often sexuality goes right into the category of secrecy.

Carla Long 11:15

And that's not okay. Because I've been working with youth for, well, as long as I've almost been alive. And it invariably comes up, say, in the cabin when you're getting ready to go to sleep. I think it comes up more in boys' cabins that it does in girls' cabins from what I hear, but my campers have asked about it. And I never, ever quite know how to answer questions. Do I answer them as a person? Do I answer them as a minister? Do I answer them as a counselor? And because in Community of Christ, we take

child protection very seriously, it's a really hard question. So what I'm hearing you say is that when we answer these questions, we answer them as all three. We answer them as a counselor, if you're in a camping situation, as a minister and as a person. But I feel like you have to be so careful and be prepared for it, which is why it's important to talk about it. If you talk about it, you can prepare for it. And then you can be ready to answer with appropriate answers and be ready for those questions, even though they make you a little bit uncomfortable.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 12:18

Yeah, it's just like with anything in the theological world. If you haven't thought about it, and you haven't heard it talked about, you don't have a language to talk about it, or to draw it into the rest of your theology. And so it takes practice, and it takes hearing it. And I think that's the thing that youth are so hungry for, is to hear someone talk about this natural part of who we are, our sexuality, in ways that remove it from shame, that remove it from secrecy. That in a very matter of fact way say, this is who we are. And, you know, these are things that we can expect in different parts of our lives. We can understand what's happening in our body. Once we can acknowledge that what's happening in our body is normal and natural, then we can also have the freedom to engage our minds as far as making decisions. And quite often those two things get separated for young people who are exploring relationships. And they tend to think that what is happening physically is the whole truth. Not recognizing that they have, if they understand themselves, how they're thinking, and decisions they may want to make, are also as real and that they don't have to simply be at the mercy of their hormones or the heat of the moment. So yeah, it's really important to give all ages language to talk about this aspect of our physicality, but it's more than that. Because our sexuality is connected to our spirituality, it's connected to our images of male and female of roles and identity too. So it's really important.

Tony Chvala-Smith 14:39

You know, I think, too, it's important for us to say that there's a lot of dishonesty in the church about sexuality. I can't tell you the number of times I've been in youth camp settings, where we have some kind of chats, class or something like that, in the evenings usually, and questions about sex and sexuality always come up. And what's interesting to me is to hear the parents who are present who are maybe on staff at a camp, whom I know personally had sexual experience before they were married, you know, immediately go to the "Thou shalt not, you mustn't do this." And so I think kids are always on to that dishonesty, I think they suspect. They suspect that. And so, even within the church's own culture, we've often not had good ways to be honest about it. Like, adults have not typically had headways to be honest about their own sexual experience when they're working with youth. And so there's kind of this secret double standard. You know, the adult knows what he or she was involved in as a teenager or young adult, but they somehow feel this automatic obligation, because of the church's culture, to say, "You must not do that." And I tend to think that kids often smell a rat there.

Carla Long 16:10

And we do kind of go back to that. I want the Bible to back me up here. Just a couple years ago, when I was in seminary, a good friend of mine was teaching a class at a reunion for junior high and high schoolers. And she came up to me and she said, Carla, where in the Bible, does it forbid premarital sex? And I was like, I don't think it does. I don't think that's what it says. But she's like, no, it has to say that. I'm like, I don't think that it does. She's like, it has to say that because I want to say that. I'm like,

well, you can say I guess what you want to say, but I don't think that's what the Bible says. The Bible doesn't say that at all. So anyway, we want something to back us up and say premarital sex is wrong, this is wrong, this is wrong, this is wrong. And then this is the way you should be. And it's just not the way it is. What we require is open and honest conversation, which is really, really hard for a lot of people to do, myself included.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 17:05

Yeah, yeah. And I agree, scripture is often used not as the primary source of understanding, but as ammunition. And you know, we already talked about scripture and some of the bad ways it's used, and some of the better ways it can be used. And you know, I completely agree with you there, is that the Bible really doesn't say anything about this. In our cultural setting people want to find something that they can use, but that does an injustice to the Bible, as well as to the issue. Because then we are using guilt, guilt from God as a way to control people, and especially in the areas of sexuality, that has often a lifelong impact that is not positive.

Tony Chvala-Smith 18:04

Yeah, I totally agree with that. And I think part of our issue here is that there's still a working assumption that the Bible, number one, is a book. Well, it's not a book, right? It's a library. We've talked about that before. Another assumption is that the Bible somehow has within it a ready-made sexual ethic that somehow applies to all time. And I find that very peculiar, because if you were to read through the many books of the library called the Bible, you would find a whole array of sexual practices and marriage practices, none of which you would want to teach youth to do, right?

Carla Long 18:41

Oh!

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 18:42

And they don't agree with each other, you know.

Tony Chvala-Smith 18:45

So we have to be careful here to uphold our best standards of biblical interpretation. The Bible is not simply a rulebook that you can just drop on a situation and say, 'the Bible says.' Because look, the Bible doesn't say anything until we make it say things. And the Bible runs the full gamut on sexuality. Also, you know, on the issue of, for example, premarital sex, people say, well, that's what fornication is. Look in the New Testament, the Greek word porneia, that we get the English word fornication from, refers first and foremost to prostitution. And so in our context, when we're talking about premarital sex, it bears no relationship whatever to marriage practices, for example, in the Greco Roman world, or in the ancient Near Eastern world, where in most cases, kids were pledged by parents to each other. Where there is no dating scene or anything like that. It's a totally different world. And when you and young adults talk about the issue of premarital sex, the term fornication really doesn't even have any relevance to that, because we're not talking about prostitution, right? We're talking about something quite different, related to modern and postmodern context. And so we have to learn to read scripture way more intelligently and sensitively on these issues, and especially working with the idea that there is no just one size fits all ethic within the Bible. We have to think carefully about our use of scripture, especially in in the area of human sexuality.

Carla Long 20:36

We definitely do and just... I want to move on to more Community of Christ, and the way Community of Christ views sexuality. But before we do, I want to give a little anecdote of what happened once at a junior high camp that I was at. We encourage the kids to write up whatever question they wanted to ask and put it into this basket anonymously. And then we would do our best to answer these questions. And, you know, because if one kid is wondering about it, the other ones are probably worrying about it or wondering about it, too. So I remember one question was specifically about what does first base, second base, third base, and home run mean, in a sexual context? And so we discussed that. And then later on that night, a girl pulled me aside and she said, now Carla, when they're talking about second base, are they really talking about baseball? And I'm like, obviously, you didn't listen at all. She was very confused. And the thing is, I think we psych ourselves out when we talk about sex with high schoolers or junior high kids. I think we kind of think that they're really asking about something that's way too much. And we think our brains go in 1000 different directions, when really they're just like, are we talking about baseball or not?

Tony Chvala-Smith 21:48

I think it's also important to note on that, that some of this is peculiarly American. I think all Europeans I know have a totally different framework for this, that's not shaped by puritanism and evangelicalism and so on. They have a completely different framework. And I think European kids know a lot more. And they know a lot more from their parents and from school. And there are not these knee jerk phobias in school districts about sexuality and so on. I think we have to claim this, what we're talking about, is a peculiarly American problem.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 22:29

It's fun to watch otherwise articulate people and ourselves at times as well, that, you know, we can be articulate about all kinds of other things. But when it comes to talking about sex, we become giggling 13-year-olds.

Carla Long 22:46

Yes.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 22:48

We talked about this before Carla, but the listeners might find it funny to know that we realize that as we're talking about sexuality today, that there's going to be lots of things that we say that will bring a chuckle because of the double entendres that could come along with it. So for the listener, feel free to chuckle whenever that happens, since it's still one of those self-conscious things. That is part of our culture, because we're not really comfortable talking about sexuality. And so all the little phrases that are euphemisms for different kinds of interactions make us giggle.

Tony Chvala-Smith 23:36

Now did she just say 'interaction'?

Carla Long 23:38

Ah, yeah, that's what she said.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 23:43

So anyhow, permission given to chuckle.

Carla Long 23:46

Absolutely.

Tony Chvala-Smith 23:47

We think of this podcast as a Freudian field day.

Carla Long 23:51

So enjoy, listeners, enjoy. So I wanted to get to a more specifically Community of Christ, because I know I get a lot of questions about sexuality and Community of Christ, and what we believe, and what we think, and how we are in certain questions and certain realm. So let's talk a little bit about maybe our enduring principles. What is the relationship of Community of Christ values and principles, like the worth of persons, responsible choices? How is that related to the issues of human sexuality?

Tony Chvala-Smith 24:25

I think a good place to start there would be to say, as a church we are moving away from rule-based ethics to a principle-based ethic. That is, when you think of Christian ethics in terms of rules, then you start thinking in terms of lists of things you should and shouldn't do. Before long what happens with lists of rules is that you lose the sense, first of all, that the gospel of Jesus is first of all about an incredible gift. And it's only secondly about tasks and responses. So moving towards principles then helps us, as a church, think about things like sexuality in light of the larger grace and love of God. That's really, really important. So that's a starting point. Another place, another framing of all this, is that Community of Christ's message and identity, and especially our journey over the past 40 or 50 years, has been a journey towards a church that will live in a liberative freeing way. That we want to help create on earth societies of justice, peace, equity, in which human beings are allowed to flourish and are valued as beloved children of God. In other words, we're talking about the reign of God. That's the larger framing for our enduring principles. And I think that helps a lot with this particular set of issues. In other words, we want to see sexuality in light of the larger concern of what is a human being? What makes human communities flourish? What are principles that allow us to live in ways that honor human beings, you know, in their fullness in their entirety? So that's a starting point for me.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 26:31

Yeah, I agree.

Carla Long 26:33

Good, well. Oh, go ahead Charmaine.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 26:35

I was going to say it was good stuff.

Carla Long 26:37

It is good stuff. Well, you know, one of the reasons that this question is really important is that as a Community of Christ minister, I get asked about these things. And I felt like my last answer of, well, it's all about responsible choices, was really weak. And so I'm so happy to have a way to talk about this, a way to frame this, because really, what I think people are asking is, will God condemn me if I have sex before marriage? And basically, can I do it or not? And what does the church say? And so it's really important to talk about this kind of stuff.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 27:12

Yeah. But it is one of those places where we really can't say, well, the church says such and such.

Carla Long 27:25

Right, we can't.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 27:26

Because of that not being first and foremost rule-based, and that really gives lots of room for the nuances of relationships.

Tony Chvala-Smith 27:32

But I think it takes a lot more work intellectually and spiritually to be part of a community that says, actually, what we're going to work with is principles. And we're going to give you those as tools and a community context in which to think about these issues. But responsible choices wouldn't be choices if we were making them for you, right? You know, so it's not as easy a place to live from when we say we're not going to give you 'thou shalt's' and 'thou shalt not's'. And by the way, the places that do give kids and youth, and young adults, older adults lists of rules have to deal all the time with the fact that nobody keeps the rules, right? So in other words, a principle based ethic that works around things like worth of persons and responsible choices, and what makes for a mutual relationship, that's more complex. But you know what, life is complex. So I think it fits that.

Carla Long 28:40

That's right. And when an organization has all of these rules that you have to follow, the problem is you have to keep coming up with more and more and more rules, and there will never be as many rules as there are ways to get around them. And so I mean, you really paint yourself into a corner when you say we have all the answers and these are the rules that you must follow in order to get into heaven, or in order to be a member of our church or in order to be a good person. Because things are changing, continually changing all the time. And it's hard to keep up with the amount of rules that we need to start following if that's how we are. So thank goodness, that's not how we are except we - as Community of Christ members - have to think really deeply about our enduring principles and what they mean to us. So, you know, just recently for Community of Christ, actually, these things really came to the forefront in section 164 of our Doctrine and Covenants. We started talking, oh my goodness, out loud about some of these issues that have been a part of who we are for many, many years, if not decades. So in section 164, we in Community of Christ, started talking about the need to have better language to talk about LGBTQIA+ people. And so our president, President Veazey, really came forward with some really hard stuff for us to talk about. So a couple years ago, we really had to start talking about this in Community of Christ, because it came as an inspired counsel to us, which later became section 164 in our Doctrine and Covenants. And we had to get to a place where we had to have better language when

we spoke about people and their sexuality. And this is what section 164:5 says: “It is imperative to understand that when you are truly baptized into Christ, you become part of a new creation. By taking on the life and mind of Christ, you increasingly view yourselves and others from a changed perspective. Former ways of defining people by economic status, social class, sex, gender, or ethnicity are no longer primary. Through the gospel of Christ a new community of tolerance, reconciliation, unity in diversity and love is being born as a visible sign of the coming reign of God.” So for us, that really brought to the forefront these conversations we had to have about sexuality and about, you know, even the ordination of women, and the male patriarchy, which we still find ourselves in, even in 2016. So we had to start talking about them, right?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 31:31

Right, and you are right, we have been talking about this in one way or another for decades. And really, in many ways, a new beginning of talking about this started back in the 60s and 70s, in the 1960s and 70s, with what has been called the sexual revolution. This is one of those places where development in a culture really helped to open up religious people's minds and eyes. And so what happened within our church and many other churches is that in the 1960s and 70s, with this reaction by what we now call the baby boomer generation, to some of the mores and the rules of the day, opened up this whole new way of understanding who we are, sexually as well as as human beings. And so out of that time period came not only renewed civil rights protest, in wanting to affirm the worth of all people, but also women's liberation. And again, as I said earlier, sexual revolution, a reclaiming of the human person, in many ways, but including sexuality. And some really important things happened in that time. Some people say, why are you going back through history? And I think hopefully I'll be able to show how it affects where we are now. But things like the pill, so oral contraception, that then made some choices available to women that weren't available to them in the past, as far as their sexual life, and sexual relationships. These are choices that men had had for a very long time. And now women had some choices as far as how and when they were involved in sexual relationships, and what the outcome would be. As one young adult woman that I met said of one of her professors who was teaching on women's liberation was that the teacher had said, the power to decide if and when you will have children, you should never give up. And women in this time, in the 60s and 70s, became empowered. They realized that they did not have to be dependent on the system that told them that their value came from who they were married to, or how many children they had. And so there was a lot of things in this time that gave a whole generation, and then those watching that generation emerge, new eyes kind of like putting on a new set of glasses, lenses that gave new ways of seeing reality. And during that time, women began to put into words some of the ways in which they had been oppressed by a society who, you know, as much as we would want to think of Western society as being, you know, open minded and progressive, there were still many ways in which women were still considered the property of men. You know, there are still vestiges of it in traditional wedding services. And the idea that in a marriage, a man's satisfaction was what mattered, not necessarily the woman's, whether that was socially or sexually. And so all of this new way of seeing things helped women in the culture, but also within churches, to start verbalizing some of the ways in which they had been told and we're being told that they were of lesser worth, in all kinds of realms within the RLDS church, now Community of Christ. One of the places that women coalesced some women who were wanting to challenge the way things were, was in the area of ordination, questioning, why would women not be as qualified as men to do these things. And so, you know, some things that began in the culture translated very well into the church, and I think really provided us with some foundation for beginning to talk about justice within the church. And so

women's awareness was raised. And their ability to support each other in questioning a male dominated institution that liked it that way. But much of the culture didn't realize how male dominated it was, how patriarchal. How everything revolved around a man, or men. And even the language we would use, where we talked about a human being, we talked about man, and women had to kind of do this mental calisthenics to try and figure out how do I fit into this language. And so the 60s, 70s, and 80s were just, in some ways, a really tumultuous time, in the culture and within the church, but a really revealing time. Because we now had new eyes as women to see who we were, and that our relationship with God, our prayers, our acts of service, were just as valuable as a man's was. But you know, even in the debates about ordination of women, it's really so informative. Because I remember one of the arguments that was offered, about why women shouldn't be ordained, came out of this fear of women's sexuality. Because within the culture, women tended to be seen as first and foremost sexual beings. And there was a great deal of discomfort with that. And so this argument against ordination of women was a scare tactic. It was, well, if this was towards other women, would you want your husband going on a priesthood visit with another woman. And it just, it revealed so much, it's like, it sees women as a threat, not trustworthy because of their sexuality.

Tony Chvala-Smith 39:24

And it sees males is not able to make responsible choices themselves, if there's a woman around.

Carla Long 39:30

Right?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 39:32

Exactly! And so it's things like this that reveal all of these hidden messages that had just been taken in, you know, absorbed in the culture. But this uprising of new thought and challenge in the 60s and 70s gave lots of people new eyes for seeing. It also, as often happens when there's development culturally, is that then there becomes a reaction. And actually, during this time of sexual discovery, not just for women, but for gay and lesbian people who are beginning to find a voice, and finding people who are courageously standing up and claiming who they are, there's a whole new awareness of what equality really means, and what it means to embrace who you are sexually. But whenever that happens, there's almost always a reaction. And the easiest way to see that reaction - there's other ways this happened to - but with the rise of the religious right, and its primary goal was to maintain the status quo, to undo these new understandings and to maintain sexual power over women, over people that had in the past had to hide who they were, to turn back reproductive choice, that's still going on. And in that whole idea of women being less than, and more the property of men. So, you know, whenever there's a movement forward, there's a reaction, and we can see both of those things. So out of that milieu, our prophets, presidents, and then the body itself, began to sense that God was calling us to some uncomfortable new places, and that included being willing to talk about sex and sexuality, and to be open to God's calling to all people. And so I don't know, but that gives a little bit of a context that leads up to where we are. It's been a difficult time, there have been some people, who didn't benefit from the conversations in the 60s and 70s, either who didn't know how to. Real discomfort, with language for people who didn't grow up talking about this. And so the term 'generation gap' created its own kind of gap in the church, when it came to topics of sexuality, and some of that persists today. So anyhow, those are some of the things that have both expanded our understanding of who we are in God's sight, but also of each other. Does that help?

Carla Long 43:19

Absolutely!

Tony Chvala-Smith 43:23

I think it's really important then to frame all of this in the context of a larger struggle. And the larger struggle is the struggle against oppressive structures that demean and degrade people. And one of the most difficult of these structures to deal with is the structure Charmaine just described as patriarchy. You know, patriarchy is the assumed dominance of males. And in the American context, it's the assumed dominance of white males, over all things. Current reactivity in American society is probably based on awareness that patriarchy is the emperor who's been shown to have no clothes. And it's not just the way things are eternally meant to be. And so the people who benefit from patriarchy react against it being shown up for what it is, an oppressive structure, and they go to great and nasty lengths to defend it and propagate it. But it is a humanly created structure. It's not the essence of things. By the way, can I think as a Trinitarian theologian for a second and just say, look, constitutive of the divine being is mutuality, mutuality among three co-equal persons. There's not one is above the other in the divine being. And if the church is meant to live out of the revelation of God, in Christ, by the Spirit, then the church should be the place where mutuality, where unity in diversity, is most visible and most practice. So anyway, this is like all of these issues about sex and sexuality, I think, you know, can be framed like Charmaine framed it very well, which is as part of the struggle against patriarchy.

Carla Long 45:32

And while patriarchy is still a problem in many places, and in Community of Christ in some ways as well, you know, I am of the generation that has certainly profited from the section 156 in the Doctrine and Covenants, that talks about the ordination of women in 1984, because I was only seven years old when that came out. And my mother was almost immediately ordained to be a priest. And so, for a majority of my life, I have grown up with women in the priesthood. I have never known or really remember a time when women weren't up front, giving sermons, being a part of the leadership of congregations. So my generation, so the people in their 30s and early 40s, are people who have seen really what it means to be a church that is fully inclusive of women, which is really exciting. I've never known a time when my voice wasn't accepted and appreciated and wanted in my congregation in Mapleton, Kansas. So for that, I'm really grateful for, you know, the pain and the struggle that people went through in 1984, in Community of Christ at least, to have that full inclusion of women in the priesthood. Now, do we still have a long way to go? And in other regards? Of course, we do!

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 47:01

Absolutely. And that's one of the things that hopefully, being open to being a prophetic people, can help us, because we all have blind spots. And I think maybe that's one of the bigger challenges for Carla, for your generation, and the generations after you, is that, yes, some headway was made on the awareness of women as full human beings in the 60s and 70s, and within the church through ordination. But there are still many both overt and covert messages about who women are and aren't. And for other groups within the society as well, whether it be gay and lesbian or transgender people, or people of different nationalities, or people of different racial backgrounds. There are still so many blind spots that we have as a society. And sometimes it gets harder to see when we think we've made big steps. Because we tend to want to think we're there, but there's still so much to be learned and so

many doors to keep opening to God and to each other, as we continue to explore what it means to help each other be fully human, and for them to know that they are fully loved by God. And yeah, so the following generations still have lots of revealing to do.

Tony Chvala-Smith 48:49

Maybe I can give just a little example from our own life of where we constantly see these blind spots done in the church's life. So most people who know Charmaine and me know we do a lot of ministry together as a team. And you would be surprised at the number of times in a given year, when we have been invited together to come to this or that event to minister together. And yet, who do you suppose the people email and don't email when they're trying to pass on information about the event? Right, or sometimes even whose name gets left off the bulletin? It's not mine. And this is people who know we work together, who invite us to come together. And yet, very, very often we're having to send an email and say, look, we're doing this together. Could you please include Charmaine in the cc line or in the address line? It's amazing how much a blind spot that still is. There's this tendency to think, yes, we're having Charmaine and Tony come, and what they're seeing is the male coming, and they're not even aware of that, and so there's lots and lots of progress yet to make. We've come this far by faith, but we've got journeying yet to do.

Carla Long 50:10

For sure. And I think, Charmaine, what you were saying earlier is a really big call to us as a prophetic people that, you know, you're right. I feel like, hey, we have done a great job. It's so fun to look back and be like, thank goodness we're not like those people back there who didn't think women could do anything. We are so enlightened. We know everything that God is calling us to do. But where are my little itchy places? Oh, no. Is that a double entendre? Where are the places that really kind of make me feel uncomfortable, that I'm not willing to go there yet? So you're right. What are those places that perhaps the millennials are dealing with it that I do not even want to think about?

Tony Chvala-Smith 50:59

And we still have to, with all that, come back to where we started this conversation: how do we actually talk about sex? Because within this larger context of patriarchy and gender equality, and mutuality, unity and diversity, we still have to deal with practical questions about what can and can't you do? It often comes to that with lots of people. And I think you referenced D&C 164 earlier. And I love paragraph 6, after what you read, about how Christ-like love, mutual respect, responsibility, justice, covenant faithfulness. These are the things that need to guide our relationships and our sex and our sexuality. And that choices, behaviors, that are based on selfishness, or irresponsibility, or, you know, greed...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 52:02

Greed, getting what I want.

Tony Chvala-Smith 52:05

I think the text uses the word promiscuous or promiscuity, but I think you can insert the word greed. I think greed is a good word for that. Wanting something for me, or you know, behaviors that degrade or abuse other people. That's where we need to be able to focus in, and to enter into conversations always with each other, and with youth, with young adults and so on, about, you know, you have to

become spiritually sensitive and attuned to your own misbegotten selfish desires, right? Not all sexual activity is based on selfishness, but some of it is and so how do you kind of think about that, and reflect on that?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 52:58

And then create relationships that aren't based on that, but that have that mutuality and respect, and that sense of responsibility for each other, and justice? That there is equality within the relationship? And where does covenant come in? What is it that we are saying to each other, about our relationships, about our sexual relationships? What does it mean to have faithfulness? Not just, you know, not having another sexual partner, but what's the bigger meaning of a relationship that's based on faithfulness? I mean, those are all questions that wherever you are, whoever you are, these are important questions about our relationships, sexual or other aspects of the relationship as well. And these are things we can talk about, with all ages, I think.

Carla Long 53:59

Yeah, and it takes a great amount of maturity, doesn't it? I mean, like what we've been talking about, it takes someone who's not afraid to start these conversations, and to have these conversations, and not maybe, you know, have a few giggles along the way, but not giggle their way through it. Because in order to be prophetic people, we need to understand what sexuality is to us as well as what it means perhaps to someone else. I was just, oh gosh, I was on Pinterest the other day and I came across this quote that I think kind of has a little bit to do with, maybe, what we're talking about here, being what it means to be a prophetic people in Community of Christ. The quote is (I don't even know who says that, maybe I should find it), the quote is, "Privilege is when you think something is not a problem, because it's not a problem to you personally."

Tony Chvala-Smith 54:54

Wow, that's perfect.

Carla Long 54:58

Yeah, so you know, I am okay with where I'm at in my relationship with my husband, but maybe somebody else isn't. And so even though I'm okay, I need to make sure other people are okay, too. That's what it means to be a community. That's what it means to be a community that follows Christ. Right?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 55:16

Right. That's really nicely said. Because too often we want to look at justice and injustice through our particular comfort level. And, you know, you said it takes maturity to talk about these. But sometimes it also takes reckless abandon to just be really honest with each other, even when it's awkward, even when we're not sure if we've got the words just right. Sometimes it's about exploring these topics of talking about sexuality by simply launching into the discussion, and breaking down some of those boundaries, those barriers that we maybe inherited, that say, oh we shouldn't talk about these things, or these are too embarrassing. And when we do have encounters like you were talking about, with the high school class or with junior highers, we realized that these can be life altering conversations in a good way. Because there are so many people, so many young people who for lack of this kind of conversation, and for lack of someone respecting them or trusting that they can get it, have been left in

situations where they have been victims, where they don't know they have choices, they don't know that they are valued, separate from value given to them by someone else, whether that's through negative kinds of attention or inappropriate sexual attention. So not talking about this is, I think, far more dangerous than then talking about it in awkward ways. And we only get better at not being awkward, the more we do it.

Tony Chvala-Smith 57:37

I just totally agree with that. I think, you know, we have to ask ourselves, alright, so there's risks involved to the church in talking about sexuality and sexual ethics, but what are the risks of not talking about it? Right, and so sex and sexuality are part of our humanity, and they can be really joyful, life affirming, delightful experiences. But also, sexuality is a place where people can get completely broken and abused, and it has the potential for destructiveness in people's life. And if the church says that the risks are too great to talk about sexuality, in terms of the church's current views of ethics and so on, then we may be complicit in bringing harm to people, too.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 58:35

And not only harm, but communicating to people that they are invisible, and this is a blind spot that as a church we've really only become aware of in the last two or three decades. And that is with people who are struggling with their sexual identity. And this is often a life and death issue. Can I be who I am, is who I am okay, is who I am someone who can be loved by God and by others. And these are questions that we've learned to recognize are out there. And I think some of the decisions that church has made in just the last four years have helped us to say, this is important. This is a blind spot we couldn't see before and now we can, and we need to be not only making changes in our policies, but we need to be finding ways to talk about this so that people who are struggling, people who are just becoming aware of their sexual identity, have a safe place to come and worship, to know that they are loved by God and by others, and to come into their full being.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:00:19

If we're going to sing with joy "For everyone born a place at the table," and we're going to mean that in our communal life, then I just say, a big Amen to what Charmaine just said.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:00:33

We have lots of work yet to do.

Carla Long 1:00:37

We do! We do indeed! And listeners, if you have comments or questions about this podcast, it seems to me we actually have a lot more to say. And so we might need you to help guide the next conversation that we have about sex. Maybe there's something that has been troubling you, maybe you have specific questions about sexuality and Community of Christ. I think that Tony and Charmaine and I would be open to the idea of perhaps another podcast about it, if you would like that, if you would want that. If you have something that we didn't talk about that you thought that we should talk about. So anyway, please come with questions and comments on the Project Zion Podcast at ProjectZionPodcast.org. And we can talk about it. Tony and Charmaine, we're actually coming to the close of our hour. Is there something that you wanted to say that you didn't get a chance to say, or a point that you wanted to reiterate, before we sign off there.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:01:38

There may be, and I'll give Tony a minute to think about that, while I recommend a few places people might want to go to read a little further. If you want to know a little bit more about the emergence of ordination of women in the church, a really easy place to go, a really good place to go is Dick Howard's two-volume-history called "The Church Through the Years." And the second volume, chapter 35, is on kind of how this all happened in a historical perspective in the church. It's a very nice chapter. Another book that helps to give people a way of understanding how cultural changes give us new lenses for seeing the places where God may be calling us, and this in particular is a book that was written I believe in the 80s, and it's called "Women's Reality." And the author is Anne Wilson Schaefer. And basically, this is a real easy read, but it really gets into the idea of there being different kinds of realities, but also identifying - she would call it the white male reality, that that has been the dominant reality, that other groups, whether they be women, or people of other racial backgrounds, have tried to either form themselves to so they're acceptable in the white male reality, or that have also challenged that reality as they become aware of their worth. Anyhow, it's an easy read, woman's reality. Also, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elizabeth Johnson are really good authors to read on the emergence of women's liberation, but also women and theology, and where that has come. Elizabeth Johnson's book, "She who is," might be a good read for those who want to go a little bit deeper.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:04:06

So while Charmaine is suggesting books, I have a book I'd like to suggest to people. It's called the Song of Solomon or the Song of Songs. Joseph Smith, Jr. notwithstanding, it actually does belong in the Hebrew canon of the Bible. It is a collection of ancient near Eastern erotic love poetry. And it's so erotic, in fact, that in Jewish tradition first, but then subsequently Christian tradition, it was constantly allegorized. Both Jewish and Christian thinkers read this in their Bibles. You know, in the case of Jews in the Jewish Bible, in the case of Christians in their Old Testament, they read it there and they thought, oh my lord, what am I supposed to do with this? And so they said, I know! This is really a metaphor about God's relationship with Israel or with the church, when in fact, this is about two young lovers who are not identified as being married, finding delight in each other and finding all kinds of lovely metaphors for each other's special parts, we'll say. It's beautiful. We often have our Old Testament students, our undergrad students, read it. And you'd be surprised at how young adults who probably know way more than I did when I was 18 or 19, how they blush when they read this book in the Bible. And I think it's really important that this book is in the Bible. And I think it could be one of several starting places to talk about sexuality inside of a framework of Christian thought. So please, listeners, go read Song of Songs. I cannot be responsible for what happens after you read it.

Carla Long 1:05:59

Tony, I literally think we've just lost all of our viewers because everyone's like, I have a book of erotica in my house right now. I'm gonna go check it out.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:06:13

This has been a lovely topic to talk about and we're grateful for the opportunity to do this.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:06:17

And many thanks to you, Carla, and to Robin, for ideas and questions and places to go. As you say, there's so much more that could be said and perhaps needs to be said. But it's great to explore this topic in the context of what does it mean to be the church today?

Carla Long 1:06:41

Absolutely. And like I think we all think it's really just the tip of the iceberg. We have so much more to think about, and talk about, and pray about actually about who God is calling us to be in this issue, and in this aspect, and in this who we are. I mean, this is all about who we are as people and who God has created us as people.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:07:03

It's claiming the wholeness of who we are.

Carla Long 1:07:07

Well, thank you once again for being willing to talk about something that could be slightly uncomfortable to talk about, and for doing so with humor and grace. And, man, I literally cannot wait to pop open my Bible right now.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:07:23

We wouldn't want to get in the way of your Bible study, Carla.

Carla Long 1:07:27

Exactly. Well, thank you once again for joining us. And yeah, we look forward to our next conversation.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:07:32

Great, bye-bye.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:07:34

Bye-bye.

Josh Mangelson 1:07:57

The views expressed in this episode are of those speaking and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Latter-day Seekers team or of Community of Christ. The music has been provided by Ben Howington. You can find his music at [Mormonguitar.com](https://mormonguitar.com).