

ES 67 | Common Grounds | Sharing Around the Table  
Project Zion Podcast

Katie Langston 0:17

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Karin Peter 1:00

Welcome to common grounds part of Project Zion podcast where we discuss all things liturgical calendar. The liturgical calendar takes us through the seasons and holy days of the Christian year beginning with Advent, and concluding with the last Sunday of Ordinary Time, reign of Christ Sunday or in some traditions Christ the King Sunday. So we are in the middle of a series here on common grounds, where we have been discussing the small group resource sacred space that you can find on the Community of Christ world church website on the worship page, right next to the worship outlines and sermon helps. The guests we've been visiting with for these discussions are the folks who have been writing pieces of the sacred space lectionary series small group resource for the website. Now sacred space includes several elements of group interaction and worship. We have prayer for peace and thoughts for children and spiritual practices. And we also have sharing around the table which is the scripture expert exploration piece. So we've been visiting with our writers to hear from them. How participating as a writer for this resource that's based on the liturgical calendar has affected them outside of writing. In other words, have they become more conscious of the seasons and holy days of the Christian year, has the journey through the calendar impacted their discipleship, and our guest today is Blake Smith. Blake lives in Chicago while outside Chicago, Illinois, part of the greater metropolitan area there. And Blake is a full time Minister for Community of Christ and He serves as the Chicago mission center. President Blake has an MD PhD from St. Paul seminary and Kansas City, Missouri. And he has been on project cyan before. And we're glad to have him back. So welcome, Blake.

Blake Smith 3:08

Thanks, Karin. Thanks for having me back.

Karin Peter 3:10

Absolutely. We're glad to have this chance to visit today. So you have been writing sacred space, sharing around the table pieces for some time. And we very much appreciate your contribution in doing that. But before you started participating in developing the resource of sacred space, what was your experience with the liturgical calendar? I'm assuming through seminary, you experienced it, but let's start before that. Growing up, what was your experience? And then when did you first encounter it?

Blake Smith 3:44

Yeah, so I don't want to bore the avid Project Zion Podcast followers who might have listened to our podcast on Pentecost that we did a while back. So I'll make that part of it brief. I really didn't have a lot of introduction to Liturgical Calendar. I mean, I could remember having the Advent candles lit at church which after marrying someone who who was raised in a tradition where it was very important, I found that we were lighting the wrong candles on the right wrong Sundays and things like that, which may made a different star but really, things like lent heard of it didn't really really wasn't a part of my life as much as I can remember. Of course, I know about Christmas and Easter, but I'd never made any kind of connection to a larger hole or calendar or a rhythm of the year in terms of discipleship. So it wasn't until seminary and being at St. Paul, which has a large number of variety of denominations a very ecumenical setting, that I was really introduced not only to the liturgical calendar, but really gained an appreciation for liturgy in general. Not that I would Want to go there all of the time, but very meaningful when done intentionally.

Karin Peter 5:07

So the Christian calendar then is the walk that we share every year as we as we go through the life minister, ministry of Jesus. And with it, we experience, the three year cycle of lectionary text, the pieces of Scripture, from the Gospels and from the Old Testament that take us through all the kind of big picture and discipleship pieces through three years that so that we are biblically and scripturally informed as disciples. So, when you begin to write for sacred space, I don't remember which year cycle we were in, but I know you've been writing for some time with the resource. Why, why did you agree to do that?

Blake Smith 5:57

Well, there's several reasons. First of all, it's very hard to Say no to you, Karin.

Karin Peter 6:02

That's good to know,

Blake Smith 6:03

I've always appreciated our friendship So, but ultimate, I mean, I really enjoy writing. And I think not too long before you had asked me to be a part of that. I had done some writing for the church and there was in the past, and that there was this period of time where I didn't have an opportunity to write for the church, and to be a part of that process, working with some of the other folks across the church that are engaged at that level. So I was really excited to have the opportunity. The second part was that I love the challenge of trying to make even the hardest scriptures come alive in today's context. So it's been particularly challenging as you and I have talked about in the last several months as we were going through Old Testament scriptures and going oh my gosh, what do we do with this and you know, I think is a predominantly I I kind of consider being part of a New Testament Church focusing on, you know, the life and ministry of Christ. And not that we avoid the Old Testament or the Hebrew Scriptures, but it just isn't part of that everyday routine. So that has been helpful for me, but boy, what a challenge to go. Okay, how do you how do you take passage from some of the what sounds you know, very judgmental of God and say, okay, and I'm sure for those who are writing

the children's pieces, it's even more difficult. But But I like the challenge. And it's been a great practice for me to, to push myself and do that. And therefore I'm able to help other people locally in in my ministry, because I'm doing that hard work. I know when I went to seminary, and this a little off, but when I went to seminary, had I not gone to seminary, and it really, not only was liturgy in the liturgical calendar, not a part of my life. I didn't realize how theologically illiterate I was. I mean, yes, I know God, but I met and married a woman who had a pretty strong background in, in church. And she was asking me questions. Why do you believe what you believe? Well, I don't know. That's because that's what my mama told me to believe. You know, and, and so that too, and so this intentional process of really getting into the rhythm of that and exploring parts of the Scripture that I might not otherwise just lean toward. So, so the challenge the the enjoy writing, and really, it has become a spiritual discipline. For me. It is one way I am. You mentioned that I'm a mission center president. I'm also an ordained 70 in the church. My personality is very much spontaneous and go get it done and don't spend time in quiet meditation that's very hard for me. So the intentionality of going through the process of preparing the pieces and studying and has been has been a spiritual discipline for me, which has been very helpful. So it's something that I need. It's not all it's sometimes it's painful with Old Testament, Hebrew Scriptures, but but but it is a discipline and I and I enjoy that. So those are kind of the reasons and if I can help make that come alive for other people. That's what it's all about.

Karin Peter 9:39

So when you go through the the preparatory steps for your writing for the sharing around the table segment, and you're also looking at that in the context of where we are in this liturgical cycle of discipleship so it is it different when you're writing something, let's say during the Advent season, and it would be if you're writing something during the Easter season or during ordinary time?

Blake Smith 10:09

Yes, and of course, anybody who is familiar with the liturgical calendar, there's a lot of ordinary time. I think one of the things that I've learned about Ordinary Time as there's nothing really ordinary about it, it's either, you know, kind of going deeper on the things we've learned and one of the key seasons or preparing us in some way for what's to come. And so, but I have to say yes, that with the different seasons, so, for instance, in Lent, working through just some self examination and self exploration, and preparation is a little bit different than the preparation that I'm doing in the Advent season for the coming of Christ. If I were writing a piece on in in Holy Week, it's going to be different than when I'm thinking about Pentecost. I shared in in the podcasts on Pentecost and it has continued to stay with me. That sense of I mean, what what the I don't know if it was ever intended but what has what what stands out for me about Pentecost is this push to make the gospel make the Word of God relevant in all languages. And I'm not talking physical Spanish, French, English but to people where they are so they can hear it the way they need to hear it. So that's people in different circumstances of life and that kind of thing. So taking into account where in the season is what's going on in the current world, and what was the original context part of that preparation, you know, the, what we call the exegetical work of, of looking at the historical context and we have to understand that the

scripture wasn't written directly for us it was written for sometimes as a record of the people sometimes as a letter to the people of those times. So we have to ask ourselves questions about why why was this important? Why did this make it into the text and other things may not have? What happened right before what happens after. So all of those pieces, so putting into that they exit, you know, they exit Jesus and what is this historic context? What is this literary context? What is our current context? What is the calendar context? It's a lot of pieces, but I'm not sure if I kind of got I get excited when I start talking about all that's, that's that puzzle piece that I so enjoy trying to bring those pieces together. So, but in terms of, you know, how does the calendar affect the way I look at a piece, it's really in context of a number of other pieces, but I can't deny that it's going to have it does have some effect. Some influence, I guess, would be a better word of how we get to what I want to put in the sharing around the table piece that's gonna be before a group of people discussing that.

Karin Peter 13:29

So that was a nice lead in to talking about what the sharing around the table pieces meant to do. So in the sacred space resource sharing around the table is that piece of Scripture exploration where a small group of people or a family could sit down around the table and read a scripture and then read some explanation of the Scripture that's helpful in our context, and have some questions around it and it's meant to be at the tables. So that we can do one of the things that helps us ease into conversations and really deep listening and deep sharing and that's eat together and to share together around the table, both in, in physical sustenance and in spiritual sustenance. So how might our listeners deepen their experience with sharing around the table in their life, especially in light of where we are now, which is early April of 2020, in the midst of a pandemic, people are home.

Blake Smith 14:35

Obviously, at least for for most of us, we can't be at a physical table with someone and it's going to look, I think even going through the piece if we're at a physical table or in our current circumstances, it's going to look different for everybody. You know, we're not all mystics. I think, sometimes those who are mystics think everybody should be. Thank goodness that is not in my DNA.

Karin Peter 15:01

Mine neither.

Blake Smith 15:02

And that's okay. I I do appreciate the influence that that some of my mystic friends have had and but you know this using sharing around the table, how the folks might be able to use this even in their private setting I have begun to use sharing around the table as a daily devotion. So the one that is assigned for a particular week, and I do it after the fact I know some people will do it leading up and preparing for Sunday, especially in these in the circumstances where we're where people are gathering in congregations or in preparation for the small group to come together. I'm doing it in in after the fact but I take that sharing around the table and read it every morning as my devotion and focus in on those questions that are there and I know on the

pieces that I try to write, try to make questions that will not be too invasive and yet allow for a vulnerability. We talked about being vulnerable to divine grace. And when we're working in small groups and creating sacred community, we need to create that atmosphere that allows for vulnerability and honors, where people are in their journey. So I try to keep that in mind with the questions but then I take those questions and kind of to be my lens for the day. So what I want to pay attention to then during the week is how does my understanding of even the passage shift throughout the week or change? or How did the thing the people that I encounter the conversations that I have? also influence the way I might answer the question and I want to pay for me Practice has to pay particular attention to where that shifts throughout the week. So I may think, Okay, well, this is where I am today. This is my answer. But then at the end of the day or the beginning of the day, looking back, how did my experiences yesterday did it? Did I allow it to change me? Maybe it wasn't necessary to change maybe nothing particular happen. But that's where my spiritual discipline how I can use these as spiritual discipline is to pay particular attention not just to the answers, but how those change, shift, transform, grow, whatever during during the week. Um, so in answering these questions when we're doing that from a distance. For me, part of it is, again, maintaining that the respect and honor of allowing people to be truthful, you have to you know, sacred community is very hard to create and to maintain because we live in a society that does not recommend that we show our vulnerable selves, we want to put on our best front. But for these to be an impact in our lives, we have to be willing to honestly look at the questions to ask the questions and to listen to God.

Karin Peter 18:17

So as you were talking about how you use it in your life as a spiritual practice, it's being aware of where you are resting in that scripture and that exploration of the scripture in one moment, but also continuing that awareness as you go on through the day and I find that to be a really wonderful way to allow the sharing around the table peace to shape and form discipleship. I hope that some of our listeners choose to give that a try in their own life during this time of isolation and sheltering Did

Blake Smith 18:55

You know, I yeah, and and as maybe some kind of comfort to those who are not comfortable with meditation I, I've come to understand that that mindfulness doesn't just come through meditation, it does come through meditation. And for some of them that is a good way of spiritual discipline. But but trying to live each day and looking for ways that this week's text is made real in my daily activities and the encounters I have, just really being intentional looking for that is also a mindfulness is mindfulness in activity for me.

Karin Peter 19:32

So a mindfulness practice, if you will, yeah. A little play on words there. Well, Blake before we, we bring our conversation to a close and as part of our closing, we're going to actually go through one of the sharing around the table, but before we do that, could you share a little bit for our listeners, kind of that type of tools, resources, if you will, that you use as your friend Preparing to write a sharing around the table.

Blake Smith 20:05

So, yes, I mean, I have some texts that I've gathered. So I, first one of the one of the things that I do, first and foremost is to have two to three different translations or versions of the Scripture. Again, kind of like looking at the daily practice and seeing where those changes are. One of the things is, that becomes a good starting point for me and really gets my mind going sometimes is to say, okay, where are the word where do these, where do these translations differ? What is the word that is translated this way, and this one and this way and another one, and then beginning to dig through that? So the resources first is having a couple of different translations of the Scripture, I use a website called text week calm and actually it's been down for While they're not writing anything new, but they do have commentaries for pretty much the whole of liturgical calendar anyway, so you can, you can see a variety of commentaries from a variety of theological perspectives. You may find some that you like better than others I have. So that's important. I also, I also have a couple of commentaries that I use, I use an NRSV interpreters Bible Commentary. I have an old Harper Collins commentary. Again, just looking I want to look at a variety of perspectives not just find one commentary that is, that I like but one, but ones that will maybe make me go Oh, I'm not, I don't like that and why don't I like that? So So those are some of the some of the key resources that I use.

Karin Peter 21:58

Thank you. That's really helpful. I'm glad you mentioned the Harper Collins. It's good for listeners to know that if you are just entering into exploring scripture that Harper Collins does make a really fine, one volume commentary that's great for home use, and is pretty easy to read and easy to use. And it's a good addition to a home library. If you're going to study scripture, absolutely. And on the Community of Christ website, I think there's a whole page if you look at Bible study resources, different ones that would be good for people to look at if they're interested in purchasing Bible commentaries for their own in depth study. Well, Blake, you've shared a little bit about your process in writing and certainly a way that we can use a sharing around the table in our personal experience and in our data. Live. So if you would, would you share one of those sharing around the table pieces that you've written? And we can have that be our closing piece before we sign off?

Blake Smith 23:14

I certainly will. So our scripture for the day and as we would if I were leading a small group, if I was sharing around the table, I would begin with a scripture text. Our scripture text today comes from Exodus 33:12-23. And it says, Moses said to the Lord, see, you have said to me bring up this people, but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said I know you by name. And I know you have also found favor in my site. Now if I have found favor in your site, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider to that this nation is your people. He said, My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest. And he said to him, if your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here, for how shall it be known that I have found favor in your site, I and your people, unless you go with us. In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people from every people on the face of the earth. The Lord said to Moses, I will do the very thing that you have asked for you have found favor in

my sight, and I know you by name. Moses said, Show me your glory, I pray. And he said, I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you the name the Lord, and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But he said, you cannot see my face for no one shall see me and live and the Lord continued. See there's a place by me where you shall stand on the rock. And while my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by, then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back. But my face shall not be seen. When I read that text, you know, I thought, wow, the audacity of Moses to speak that way to God, you know. And so that is where that set the foundation for this description that I wrote for sharing around the table. So after reading the text, we would look at this piece which gives just a little explanation, and hopefully in a way that those sitting around the table can, can connect. So I write some might look at this portion of the story of the Exodus, and wonder how Moses could have the courage to speak to God. So candidly in some ways, Seemingly drawing a line in the sand and making clear his expectations and needs regarding the people of Israel. It's a wonder that God's anger is not turned on him. One could argue that Moses candid way of speaking was warranted due to the fact that he had been faithful to do everything God had asked of him. And now God was threatening to abandon the Israelites because of God's anger towards them. God says, Go, leave this place you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt. I will send the angel before you, but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way and you are a stiff neck people. The circumstances of the exchange are tense. However, and perhaps most importantly, it is equally as likely that Moses candid speech comes out of the depths of the relationship that has been built between he and God. Moses commitment to regularly meeting with God was unquestionable. The relationship was such that the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face as one speaks to a friend Exodus 33:11. This was a relationship built on deep mutual investment in one another. Moses reminds God's reminds God, you know me by name, and they are your children. The passage stresses the importance of consistent prayer time to building a faithful relationship with God. God's grace and covenant endure, even when we are sinful, and unfaithful.

So we will take a few minutes to just kind of hear that and sit with it. And then we have a few questions that we would pose for the group to think about and shares they're comfortable. The first question that I have written for this pieces, share an experience where you need someone or a group of people to intercede with God on your behalf. And in these circumstances that we're in now, living at home solo, we don't have someone with us. We don't have advocates we feel alone and isolated. I might remind them of that and who is it that they do have, that they can reach out to what intercession? Do they need? what? what is causing them frustration or struggle in this moment being really getting in touch, I guess with and giving ourselves permission to grieve this time of being alone? And, and knowing that ultimately, we are not alone? So who is it that we would want to intercede for us? The second question, what are the ways in which you work to deepen your relationship with God? Where do you meet with God? And we hear all of the places that Moses met with God and how God approached Moses or Moses approached God. Again, as we sit in our homes alone, maybe with a few family members a lot completely isolated, having no one. Where do you find God? Do you set up a special place somewhere in your house that has those components that just bring you into the presence of

God? Do you sit in a particular room and look out the window? Maybe it's a favorite chair. Where's the place where in the midst of this isolation where we are destined to feel absolutely alone? Where can we find God? And last I asked the question, when have you felt safe to speak candidly with God about your own questions and concerns? And when have you done intercession for others? Gosh, I hear so much frustration as I talk to people in this time. We are we are blessed to have the opportunity to be able to connect with technology and not be ultimately alone. But the reality is, when the camera goes off, and the computer shut down, we are there alone. It's just really an expansion of some of the frustration that we might feel even in other days when there's business all around us. I think the thing that is important for us to see here is that Moses was frustrated with God. Moses was pretty, pretty blunt with God from time to time, and yet God still had relationship with Moses. If we work to build our relationship with God and allow ourselves to be vulnerable to divine grace, God understands when we're frustrated. God understands our struggle and our doubt and welcomes the depth of relationship. That allows that kind of vulnerability.

Karin Peter 31:04

Thank you, Blake for walking us through that sharing around the table in a way that is meaningful for our circumstances now and hopefully meaningful as people listen to this in times to come. I want to thank you again, Blake for being with us from Chicago. This is Common Grounds for Project Zion podcast. I'm Karin Peter, thank you so much for listening.

Josh Mangelson 31:39

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