

306 | Toward the Peaceful One | Ron Harmon  
Project Zion Podcast

Josh Mangelson 0:17

Welcome to the Project Zion podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

Robin Linkhart 0:33

Hello, and welcome to Project Zion podcast. This is your host Robin Linkhart and we are embarking on a series of interviews with all the authors of a year long series of Herald magazine articles exploring the guiding question, "Are we moving toward Jesus, the peaceful one?" Now for those of you who might be wondering what the Herald magazine is It is the official Community of Christ magazine publication that comes out every two months. Today our guest is apostle Ron Harmon. Ron supports the western USA mission field. He is also the president of the Council of Twelve Apostles. Ron lives in Independence, Missouri and we are delighted to have Ron with us today on Project Zion podcast. Welcome, Ron.

Ron Harmon 1:31

Thank you, Robin. It's really great to be with you. And I've been looking forward to this opportunity to engage in this really important topic with you.

Robin Linkhart 1:39

Well, thanks so much for making time in your busy schedule. Ron, we like to get to know our guests. So please tell us just a little bit about you.

Ron Harmon 1:51

Well, you know, the most important thing about me is that there is this amazing cute little girl named Emma that calls me grandpa. For me right now one of the more significant things in my personal life that I immediately am drawn to and asked this question, but I did grow up on the west side of Cleveland, very close to Lake Erie, which, back when I was growing up, they call it the mistake on the lake. Because of all the pollution back then in Lake Erie, in fact, you couldn't even really go into Lake area was that bad, but Cleveland today and Lake Erie is a beautiful place. My family goes back several generations in the church. And I really have myself been just totally formed and shaped by Community of Christ in so many ways. Growing up in a little congregation on the west side of Cleveland as a young person and having all these amazing opportunities that you have when you attend a small congregation. I have often felt like what I was able to do in the first half or so of my career outside the church, much of the success of that seemed to be a lot more attributable to that small congregation and all the opportunities that I had, then I think it did with any formal degrees or education that I achieved years later. Barb's a preschool teacher, and we have three kids, Katie, Daniel, and Lindsey. I have already mentioned our amazing granddaughter Emma, and I love music. That's kind of one of my hobbies. I play around with the guitar a little bit and also play Viola and trumpet but I don't do that a whole lot anymore. And when I do have time off—which is always time that I highly value with with Barb and family—we all love hiking and Barb and I in particular really enjoy cycling,

we love to go for bikes, bike rides, on trails, different trails that we try out and I am also a photographer-want-to-be. I love to capture beautiful images out in nature and I'm not sure how good I am. But I really enjoy it. So that's just a little bit about me.

Robin Linkhart 4:38

That is great to know Ron. In fact, you reminded me of something I'm gonna keep in mind next time that I have the opportunity to interview you on Project Zion podcast, and that is that you are a gifted musician. Now you may not know this, but oftentimes when we have musicians on our podcast, we invite them to share a little bit of their talent in the closing of the podcast. So since I didn't warn you ahead of time, I won't, I won't make you do that this time, but you can start working up your Project Zion podcast collection for your next interview on your guitar.

Ron Harmon 5:17

My best hits!

Robin Linkhart 5:18

Yes, yes, we'll do that for sure. As I said in the introduction Community of Christ is running a year long series of articles in the Herald focused on the guiding question our president Stephen Veazey shared at World Conference 2019. "Are we moving toward Jesus, the peaceful one?" Now Ron, your article is actually the second in the series and was featured in the July August Herald 2020. Entitled "Looking Back to See Ahead." Now I happen to know Ron that you have authored several articles in the Herald since you were ordained to the Council of Twelve, and maybe before that. I want to know, how do you go about writing a feature article for publication? Like, do you have some kind of particular process or approach that you take when you're working on something like that?

Ron Harmon 6:17

Well, I have this amazing ghostwriter for me that does all. No, I'm just kidding. Sometimes I wish I did have a ghostwriter. No, you know, I do have an approach that I take. And kind of what I do first is, I really try to focus in on you know, what is the primary message of the article? What is it that I want to convey? And the title for that article is actually a title that I proposed for the article. And, and then the next topic, kind of question I was asked myself because it is a Herald article. The scope of the Herald is is, you know, global in nature, at least some of the articles are. I'm always asking myself is this this is topic connect across cultures? So that's kind of always the second question I asked myself. And then the way I do it very simply is try to outline what I think what are some key points I want to convey in the article, either topics or themes or points. And then from there, I always normally I like to do some research and study before I write. I just find that it really stimulates my mind and sometimes helps me make some important connections that I might not make otherwise. And I think it's always a better article. When I consult what some other really good thinkers out there theologians and practitioners in the field are thinking. So once I've done that, and of course for this article, I read a couple, a couple books I read a book by John Dominic Crossan. It was called, it was called God and Empire. And then I read another book that was very influential that we had in seminary Community of Christ seminary. That was about I think the title of that was Jesus and Empire.

Something similar to that. I referenced that later on, I'll make sure I get the title right case anybody wants to look up that book, but it's actually an excellent kind of summary of the the context of the first century and what that meant in terms of Jesus. So and then I'll then I basically just start filling out narrative, you know, under those points. And I always go through several drafts, and I found one thing for me, that's really helpful. Is after your heads in an article for a while, you just need to walk away from it. And so I'll write it and I try to give myself enough time before to to date, so that I can write a draft and just get away from it for a couple of days, and then come back to it. And I always find some things that I felt like I could write better or say more clearly, or, or maybe some aspects that that I missed. And a lot of times I will, you know, connect with another colleague and say, Hey, would you take a look at this and let me know what you think. So that's kind of what my process is for writing a Herald article.

Robin Linkhart 9:40

That is very interesting. Okay, Ron. So, "Looking Back to See Ahead," and as you indicated, that's the title you chose for this article. So how does this focus connect with a series on, "Are we moving toward Jesus, the peaceful one?"

Unknown Speaker 10:00

Yeah, so you know, kind of on a humorous note, there's another title in my head that's related to this title, which were some movies that I really used to like that Michael J. Fox starred in called "Back to the Future." So I've actually always been, I've always found that to be a provocative title "Back to the Future," the idea that there's ancient wisdom that can be uncovered that can help point us in, you know, the direction of some of the next faithful steps that we may be called to engage as a movement. So, for me, the key phrase related to the whole article in the series, which is, you know—moving toward Jesus the peaceful one—is this idea of moving toward. "Do we know the one that we're seeking to move towards, or to emulate? And so for me, the place I always start in this conversation is with the mystery of the incarnation, the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. This idea that Jesus was the embodiment of divine love in all of its fullness. And this this meaning of the incarnation, for me, is more than the idea of of like a supernatural being just somehow inhabiting a human body. I sometimes think we almost have this view of, of Jesus like he came down in a, he came down in a spaceship, and just kind of hung out on Earth a little bit, and and then left. But for me, Jesus was born of Mary and was fully human and fully divine in ways that I honestly I have absolutely frankly no understanding of what that fully meant. It's a mystery to me. It's one of those things. I think that all these. kind of remains in the category divine mystery, mystery. But what's so powerful for me about that is looking back on that is therein for me lies our hope. That we might discover, in a sense in our humanity, our best truest selves, as a tangible expression of divine love. That that all connects together in ways that Jesus lived and embodied divine love. And for me that provides great hope and possibility for what we can become individually and what we can become together as as God's loving, interdependent global human family. So, this understanding of Jesus is, you know, being fully human, I think is absolutely essential to understanding his life ministry and message and, and so the fact that he was human meant that his experience happened in a particular time and place, the first century. And that that revelation of God in Christ in order to fully understand that we we also have to understand the

time and the place in which that revelation took place. That that by understanding that that gives us a whole new and deeper appreciation for what that revelation truly was. And so, you know, Jesus grew up in Nazareth, he learned a trade. He experienced what life was like, under Roman occupation. Jesus didn't just, you know, kind of have to be aware of the realities of the first century. It was Jesus' reality, the first century was his lived reality as a first century Jew under Roman occupation. And so, you know, his manifesto of mission of Luke 4:18 and 19 to me, is in direct response to what he witnessed in the suffering of his own people. And the Holy Spirit as it moved upon him and brought that deep, deep conviction he had about his call and his mission that I think must have happened in a significant way. When he was taken away into the, into that desert time that he had, I think it was a time of clarification for him after after his baptism. So if we want to move toward Jesus, I believe we have to look back. In order to understand something about the context of that revelation, we have to move toward human oppression and suffering, in order to really understand his words and actions, through this lived reality in the first century, and he exposed that oppression in his life . and ministry. And then he powerfully envisioned an alternative future where the many, not the few, would experience wholeness and well being, or shalom. So, if we only look at things to our 21st century lens, we run the temptation of misinterpreting the radical nature of Jesus' life and ministry, and perhaps making this mistake of thinking that Jesus was somehow just kind of aloof to all of that. Aware of it, but maybe not fully impacted by it. Where we just see him as this spiritual teacher or a divine being who kind of just somehow kind of move through things almost like in this transcendent way, but not fully engaged in the experience. I think what we understand about the gospel narratives, and Jesus' life and ministry was that was not at all the case. We saw in many examples where Jesus paused, he stopped. He was deeply impacted emotionally by the suffering of people that he encountered and offered healing and hope, new life and new possibility. So just the last thing for me under this whole topical areas that, you know, I think that what's really important about this looking back to look forward is that we, we develop this appreciation for the fact that Jesus was not crucified because he was spreading God's love. Jesus was crucified because the love, the radical love that that he was talking about that he was seeking to demonstrate in his life and ministry, actually demanded a radical reordering of economic, political and religious priorities, that at the time, were actually benefiting a very small group of people in significant ways that were the ruling classes of the time, at the expense of everyone else. And Jesus was calling that whole order into question and as a result of that, it was very threatening to those that were in power and in control at the time.

Robin Linkhart 17:50

I love the way you draw us into embracing the mystery of the Incarnation and how looking back to see ahead is actually, what you've taken on in this article is focusing on who it is we want to move toward and all the dimensions that are encapsulated, just in that one part of understanding the question to start with. Okay, so Ron, you've really helped to build a bridge from the focus of the series to your topic, Looking Back to See Ahead. So now I want you to just take us by the hand and step us through the main points of your article. I mean, you are serious about looking back all the way back. And you've already touched on how important that is to understand this person named Jesus. So take us on that journey with you.

Ron Harmon 18:54

Yeah, I think as I, as I post the article, I would kind of do guided into kind of three key themes or three key areas one would be, you know, why does context matter? And how does it impact responsible interpretation and faithful application of Jesus' life and ministry? A second would be what was happening in the first century in Palestine? And what does it have to do with Jesus then and now and we've already started to begin to build that bridge. And then the third area actually is all of this, to me, moves us beyond what has become in the modern world for some, this prevailing kind of view that the life and ministry of Jesus is only about private spirituality, and that it's not really involved in kind of the affairs of life and in the public square. And so the last kind of thematic focus for me is moving beyond private spirituality to what I would call communal salvation. And and how you know how looking back, helps us to see ahead to how we are called to be co-creators of that new possibility for our world. So I'll just jump in with why does context matter. And in the article, I referred to context as the rest of the story. And I think that context, as I started to talk about earlier is absolutely essential to understand God's revelation in Christ more fully to be able to, you know, express and understand this Word became flesh, this love was embodied in tangible ways. You know, when we talk about that we talked about the parables of Jesus, we talked about what Jesus said, we look at the language and symbols of the time to try to bring you know depth and meaning to that. And that's all about context. Some of you may remember that Leymah Gbowee was a Peace Award recipient, I think two conferences ago and to refresh your memory in war ravaged Liberia, she organized Christian and Muslim women to demonstrate together and she founded the Liberian mass action for peace. And she launched protests. And if people don't remember anything else she said at World Conference, they probably would remember that she also said that they launched a sex strike. And her efforts with thousands of women across Liberia forced the warring factions to the table to bring an end to conflict and killing which was really absolutely unbelievable. When you look at the fact that these women step into—unarmed—into a situation with warring warlords with machetes and automatic weapons, and they were able to bring this peaceful solution. Well, Barb and I had an opportunity to have dinner with her when she was in town for the Peace Award. And, of course, she you know, we had an opportunity to talk about her her life's work and her family. I was impressed very much with her address to the World Conference. But here's what I want to share about context. After she left. I read her book, and I sure wish it would, I would have read it before she got there. But after she left, I read her book. It's called *Mighty Be Our Powers*. How sisterhood, prayer, and sex changed a nation of war. For me, it was the rest of the story. And I've never been so moved in my life by someone's personal story in the context of her incredibly difficult life and struggle, including the terrible things that happened to her personally, that were very difficult to hear in her story— and, and to try to figure out how on earth did she rise up out of this incredible suffering, to be able to lead a movement that would bring peace to her war torn country. It was in the context of reading her story that what she said to the World Conference all of a sudden, took on new life and meaning for me. I had a spiritual experience with a book where the spirit bore powerful witness to me that God has and is moving in some of the most desolate and seemingly godforsaken places. And almost as though at times the Spirit is trying to get our attention and say to us, "Hey, wait a minute, take a look here, it doesn't have to be this way here is an alternative vision and the way forward." Now, she didn't say a lot of this stuff directly in her address to the World Conference.

But the revelation came for me, as I understood fully the context of her experience, and the Spirit opened my eyes to see the potential of nonviolent resistance as a path to engage even in the most extreme, violent circumstances. I've heard this my whole life as a Christian. But for me, the lights went on when I heard her story and I saw how she organized these women across library. And had I not read the book and fully understood for context, I could have never fully appreciated the significance of her actions. And I also would not have had the appreciation I do today for the power of nonviolent resistance, to expose suffering, and to bring about change. And so I'm very much indebted to her but also recognize that context is what brought that to life for me.

So let me just go a little bit deeper for a moment. Context is about our interpretive lens. And one thing that I've come to understand is that is that I really I don't see things as they really are. I see them through my collective life experience, which is always limited. I'm a white male. I'm, you know, somewhere in the lower middle class, part of the economic stratum here in the United States. And I grew up in a stable family, I mean, I can start to outline all these things that make up what my collective life experience is, and how that influences how I see the world. In addition to that, though, there's a whole field of study called hermeneutics, which is the theory and method of interpretation of the Scriptures. And if my lens is solely 21st century experience, through my own collective lens, then I'm going to miss—to put it in very simple terms—the rest of the story in terms of what is going on in the first century, Palestine in particular, and how that sheds light on the significance of Jesus' life, and ministry. In other words, the rest of the story is what brings the words to life, which is exactly what the Incarnation was supposed to be about the Word became flesh. And I love what it says in the Message Bible and, and and dwelt in the neighborhood, you know, moved into the neighborhood, I think is the words that the Message uses that, that it became real when it became tangibly expressed in the mists of time and space and the reality of life. And so there's these various types of interpretation where we look at the text of what was happening in the life and ministry of Jesus, we look at the biblical text through history. We look at it through the story, how it was constructed literary construction, how the author construct the account, and why did they construct it that way? through what we call form criticism. Was it a letter? Was it an epistle? What is, what is the source of the material? For example, are they copying a source, or is it the original material.

And if you want to go into this deeper, there's an excellent book called *Interpreting the New Testament*, a practical guide by Daniel Harrington, which kind of outlines these different forms of criticism. Now, I point today is not to make you an expert in all these, but it is to simply just to say that this is this is this is complex work, to understand the first century context and to really dive into these texts, in terms of the complex literary documents that they truly are. And there were things that Jesus said and did that had specific meaning that we can understand more fully when we apply, apply those interpretive lenses. Good commentaries are a wonderful place to start for us because they, they, in a sense, kind of do a lot of that work for us. I emphasize good commentaries, because there are commentaries out there that are very biased in their view and in their agenda. So the question is, for example, what was Jesus saying here and how might that apply to the challenges and injustice as we face today? Then good interpretation of his words and actions in the first century is absolutely essential to be able to

then look and say, "Well, what does that mean to us today?" But if our question is a little different, like, how are these words speaking to me personally, in this moment of maybe personal challenge, I'm going through a personal difficulty, and we're using the text maybe more in the form of a spiritual practice, and inviting the Spirit to connect the words to our personal experience in that moment. That's a little different exercise. Both are valid, very valid ways of using scripture. But the one is a very intentional approach of trying to understand the context. And really getting to the heart of what Jesus was actually saying, by understanding that in the first century context, whereas the other is where we're really allowing the words to speak to us more in a very personal kind of spiritual way, maybe to a particular life, circumstance or situation we find ourselves in. But we really, if we really want to understand—you know, what Jesus was saying—it's important that we really do some digging in terms of understanding that context. And the last thing I want to say about context because for me, this is the power of Christian community. It's important that we come together with our collective interpretive lenses to help each other to better understand the text more fully. Again, this gets back to I don't see things as they really are. And I need others to think and look differently than I do to help me see more clearly, that this world would be a much different place if we would all just embrace that. Both in our congregations but also in our world. We need Christian community to come together and with our multiple interpretive lenses to help us come to a better understanding of what these texts are saying to us both in the first century, but then what they're also saying to us today.

So one quick example of this would be a text that we often hear referred to where Jesus in Matthew 26, John 12. And Mark 14 says "...for you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me." We could read this through a 21st century lens and kind of shrug our shoulders and say, "Oh, well, poverty, you know, what are you going to do? We're just going to kind of always have it with us." But if we go back and we understand a little bit about what Jesus was actually trying to say, and we do a little digging, in some good commentaries will find that Jesus was actually quoting another well known biblical verse, a passage of the Jewish Torah. And everyone back then would have actually got exactly what he was saying. We wouldn't get it because we're hearing it through a 21st century lens. But here, listen to this quote from Deuteronomy 15:7-11.

"If among you one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land, and the end of the Lord your God is doing Giving you You shall not harden your heart, or shut your hand against your poor brother. But you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be, for the poor will all for the poor, you always have with you in the land. Therefore I command you, you shall Open wide your hand here, brother, to the needy, and to the poor, in your land." And so, this reading of Jesus words, in their original context, understanding what he's quoting, actually in Deuteronomy, this, this, this scripture does not convey apathy in the modern world, it conveys a spirit of generosity and hope, and basically saying to us that poverty is not a situation that needs to occur if we are willing to embrace the poor with generous hearts. In generous spirits, and generous actions. So this is just just an example that actually if we go on this quickly to Acts chapter four, those early disciples also totally got it. You know what Jesus was saying, because we read these words and

acts for and so it turned out that "not a person among them was needy. Those who own fields or houses, sold them, and brought the price of the sale to the apostles and made an offering of it. The apostles then distributed according to each person's need." So this is another example of when we connect the dots. And we look at the broader context of the first century, looking back at the Torah, but then also looking ahead to what was emerging to the of the revelation of Christ in the first century, Christian community. We understand exactly what Jesus was saying with respect to the floor. That was that was kind of the context.

I mean, the other piece of this and is what's happening in first century Palestine. And let me just touch on a few brief things there. So Rome, you know, was consolidating power and establishing itself. It is really a superpower kind of like we would think about superpowers today like the United States and China. They were in the process of establishing kind of what they would view as a new world order. But it was new world order for those of power and privilege, which was an actual relatively small minority of the people that were the ruling class. For the vast majority of people. It represented a disorder, if you will, of financial hardship and state sponsored, oppressive acts that— really there's no other word for it than terrorism—to keep those who would upset the status quo in line. And so this, you know, the Roman killing or enslavement of thousands of Galileans and Judeans in response to a revolt that actually happened right around the time of Jesus birth would have been permanently etched in the minds of the people that were coming out to hear and talk with Jesus in the first century. Significant trauma resulted as a result of that uprising and what I would call the, the brutal crushing of that uprising. And then of course, we know about the later revolt in 66 to 70. You know, also described by historians as this kind of search and destroy and scorched earth policy of the Romans. This was how they did things. They sought to absolutely crush, you know, those that would have any thought of trying to resist the New World Order. And this was the reality of the first century. And the people of first century—I mean, this was a desperate situation. I don't know if we fully appreciate how desperate it was, but the people were being driven into debt.

They were, many of them, were hungry, they were struggling just to survive, primarily because of the heavy burden of taxation. And not only was there taxation for the elaborate building projects of Herod and his son, who lived in Galilee, but also there was a temple tax, in addition to that, that was levied on the people. And so when you look at that context, all of a sudden Luke 4:18-19 makes total sense. You know, it becomes clear why the Spirit of the Lord was on Jesus, when we understand the suffering that was occurring, and, you know, he was speaking directly to the conditions of his people occupied by a foreign power, and reflecting, you know, inflicting great hardship on the people. And so when we talk about the good news, I think sometimes, you know, in the 21st century, the good news for us is like, oh, gosh, this is great, you know, I mean, Jesus was kind of just like an add on to the good life here. You know, in the US, or maybe sometimes other Western countries, very different in other parts of the world where the church is established. But it was relevant news. These were quite literally saving words to families who are losing their land. Under the heavy, you know, burden of taxes, families had loved ones that were in prison. And so, you know, free the prisoners. I mean, that had very real meaning and implications. It was a good news for those that were barely surviving from day to day. It was good news for those who were deemed unclean and isolated from the



community because of religious practices at the time. They were not thinking about eternal life. Like we often become fixated in the 21st century modern world, they were thinking about how to make it through tomorrow, and the day after that. And so this was the power of the Word made flesh of Jesus' embodiment of Divine Love. He spoke, hope and possibility into hopelessness and despair. And I believe that's what the relevance is for us today, because it seems like many have profoundly misinterpreted and even exploited the good news of Jesus Christ for their own ends. And it's resulted in a mass exodus from both God and the church in the Western world. And I truly believe that what is deeply needed is a deep humility, a willingness to live in the uncertainty of our times, to live with the significant questions of our time, like, like Jesus fully engaged in with a desire to learn, a willingness to engage with others and exploring these critical questions.

Issues like we're facing right now, for example, in the US, like systemic racism, you know. We need people of depth, who are willing to stand in the shadow of the Cross in the most godforsaken places where the worst of humanity is on display, and speak words of living hope, and future possibility that have never been imagined or spoken in those places before and then be willing to creatively and non violently expose the suffering for all to see. So that it begins to change the collective consciousness. And that begins to change the political winds and countries around the world, as we stand in solidarity with those who suffer, and we say to people in positions of power in elected office, enough, is enough. So, you know, there's so many examples of this. I mean, I'm, I'm thinking at the moment about the story of Jesus in the leper and Mark 1, you know, where the leper is on the ground looking up at Jesus saying, if you choose you can make me clean. And Jesus looks down stretches out his hand, does what's not permitted under the law and actually touches the leper. But the scriptures actually—there's two interpretations of Jesus emotion in the Scripture. So one interpretation is moved with pity. The other interpretation and version of what the story says is moved with anger. Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him and said, I do choose. Be made clean.

Was was Jesus move with pity or anger? As some translations suggest, well, maybe both. But in a first century context, I think it was perhaps also significantly anger, that this man could be forced into a life of isolation because he was believed to be unclean by the religious authorities, the very ones who claimed to represent God's love. I think this is one of those moments of Jesus' humanity and Jesus' divinity converging into a moment of utter disbelief, of the suffering that had been perpetrated in the name of God. And this is just a wonderful example of how looking back helps us to see the power of Jesus words of hope, but also his actions, where he was literally pointing people to an alternative future and I've mentioned this in the article, but I love what you're getting. moldman says when he says, reading the Bible, with the eyes of the poor, is a different thing from reading it with a full belly. If it is read in the light of the experience and hopes of the oppressed, the Bible's revolutionary themes of promise, Exodus resurrection as Spirit come alive. And I think sometimes we forget that Jesus was not somehow immune to this reality. It actually was his reality.

So I think that I've kind of touched on some of the—actually, yeah, I have I think. I was looking through my notes and I think I've touched on some of the key things that I kind of wanted to

touch on in terms of the money points of the article and, and really how looking back just gives us this unbelievable depth and well of context and experience that bring Jesus words to life. And to help us to see just how powerful and significant and relevant his words were, and how powerful and significant and relevant our words and action can be today, as we look at the challenges we face in the 21st century.

Robin Linkhart 45:34

So Ron, I want to just on the heels of what you're saying now, I want you to speak to how you're seeing the things you point to in your article being lived out in the church today.

Ron Harmon 45:55

You know, I think, Robin that we've been on a journey with that. I remember in 2005, President Veasey in his World Conference address, sharing with the church, "How will we know when we are being responsive to the cause of Zion?" And he began to list you know, how are the young, how are the aged? How are the poor? How are the vulnerable doing? Are they experiencing well being? Are they having the opportunity to become fully who God created them to be? Which is the heart of justice. I feel like we've had this incredible vision of the kingdom of God, the peaceful reign of Christ, the pursuit of peace, whatever phrase you know that that resonates with you that expresses God's ultimate vision of shalom for all of the world's people. I feel like we've, we've been on a journey of continuing to deepen our understanding of that. But also, I think we've been deepening our understanding of what it means to become practicing communities that take concrete steps into that, you know, future realities so that others can kind of follow along with us and take those initial steps into the future as well. And I, as I look at our country right now, we have a lot of polarization in the United States, you know, and that's my personal context. And it has also found its way into the church, for example, in the United States, if we use that as an example. And it's very unfortunate because for some, other voices have taken precedence over the voice of the one who is calling us beyond the reality of the present to the possibility of the future. And (DC Section) 164 I think as we look at the church today 164:5 calls to this amazing vision, you know about remembering the purpose of our baptism, to be remember that it's all about continuing the process of becoming a new creation in Christ, and by taking on a life and mind of Christ, we increasingly see ourselves and others from a changed point of view, oh my gosh, is that relevant to where we are today? And Paul understood this in First Corinthians 9:19-23 when he says I became every kind of servant there was to every kind of person because I wanted to enter their experience and understand things from their point of view, so that I can convey to them this life saving message in ways that they can connect with it, and live into the new life and possibility that has totally turned my world upside down. And it's now given me new life and purpose. And 164:5 just casts this unbelievable vision at the end where it says, "Through the gospel of Christ, a new community of tolerance, reconciliation, unity and diversity and love is being born as a visible sign of the coming reign of God." I, I see communities all over the globe, that are these small community of Christ, congregations that increasingly are becoming these visible symbols. In a sense, the Word made flesh, God's love, embodied in in radical transformative ways, whether that's inclusion of people who have never felt like they belong, like the leper, and now feel like they have a place they can call their spiritual home weather. And there's so many reasons why people are

disconnected and lonely and separated out there in our world today. Or whether that's that community engaging in whatever issue of peace and justice that they are feeling called to engage in because of how the Spirit, in a sense is moving on them, just like it did Jesus. I would love to hear Community of Christ congregation say "the Spirit of the Lord has moved upon us because he has anointed us to join in the struggle against racial injustice in our community. And here's what we're gonna do" Or "the spirit Lord is upon us because he has anointed us to end predatory lending practices in our community. And here's what we're going to do in response to that spirit." Or "we're going to work toward ending poverty through micro finance loans and help people to be able to establish a sustainable way of living for themselves and to restore dignity and human worth, in ways that they can be fully who God created them to be. And that's what we're going to be about in this community." So as I think about that passage from 164:5, it's not about size. It's, it's about it's about intent. It's about incarnation, two people can form a community and embody divine intent in powerful ways. Every movement starts with a conversation between two people that say, What if? What if this is not the way it's meant to be? What if God has an alternative future? For us that is different than the suffering that we're seeing all around us? And what would it look like for us to just take some initial steps together into that future with God? I mean, that to me is how the world changes is by many of us. asking ourselves how is the spirit anointed us to bring good news and our unique ways because of our gift collective giftedness and the places that were called to serve and how that connects with human suffering and need in our our neighborhoods.

I believe we're standing in critical juncture in human history, I believe this with all of my heart. And I believe we have two choices before us. And one is fear, division, scarcity and violence. And the other is love, inclusiveness, generosity, and nonviolent change and (DC) 163 is crystal clear. Strive to be faithful above all else, strive to be faithful to Christ, vision of the peaceable Kingdom of God and Earth. This is why we have to move towards the peaceful and this is why we have to look back to look ahead. This is why we have to understand Jesus in his first century context and understand how profound his life truly was. And how because he had that of humanity and Divinity within him, that he could rise above the suffering and challenges of this time to become an example of suffering and transforming love. So too can we be that in our time and place, we can be the ones that they are waiting for those whose hearts beat an expectation, not that they're going to have eternal life sometime far off into the future. But that tomorrow, maybe could just look a little bit different than today. And that life could be a little easier. And that in the myths of those who are willing to say yes to the call to serve, that they find those initial steps forward to invite others along that journey of transformation, and change. And this is Robin and this is why I have so much hope for Community of Christ because we can do this This isn't about being big church and building big parking lots and having big bands and multimedia productions and all that stuff. To be the church, for example, in the Western world. This is about being incarnational communities that embody God's love and relationship with one another, and are willing to go on a journey of discovery and risking new questions and risking new insights, risking new actions together for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of the kingdom. And I know with all my heart that we can absolutely do this because it's in our DNA.

Robin Linkhart 55:43

Well preach it brother, I'm on board. I love it. Love it, love it, love it. So for some of our listeners, I just want to let you know that when we talk about sections followed by numbers like section 164 that we are referring to Community of Christ, Doctrine and Covenants. And you can find one on amazon.com. Or you can message me [rlinkhart@cofchrist.org](mailto:rlinkhart@cofchrist.org) and we'll make sure you get a copy of that Doctrine and Covenants. Ron, you've covered a lot of territory and really cast a vision, not only of the call of the church and our endeavor to draw closer to Jesus, the peaceful one, but also about how we can step into that. How we can take the words of Jesus in Luke 4 and understand how we too, are anointed and live into that relationship with the divine in ways that we become an incarnation of Christ presence here on Earth. So as we record this today, we are in the middle of a global pandemic. A lot of us have been struggling to even understand what the future looks like in the midst of one giant challenge. And yet we know that in our context in this time and place, there are many challenges we face and you have helped flesh out some of those for us in ways that become a deep awareness of the price that many are paying for our inability to bring justice into this world. What are some of the greatest challenges you see that we face in the next five years? And you've you've kind of framed some of the amazing possibilities, but could you talk a little bit more about how Community of Christ in particular is uniquely poised to walk into some of those possibilities?

Ron Harmon 57:57

Yeah, you know, I honestly think that one of our greatest challenges and I believe this is across cultures. I believe there's one last great unexplored frontier of mission that's before us. And I believe it is our fear of one another. I believe that the Spirit—oh, my gosh, what a gift in 163:1, the Spirit is trying to help us see that our future lies in our ability to be vulnerable with one another in community to listen to one another in community and I use community in the broadest sense not just our congregations. But our neighborhoods, those people that look and think differently than we do this, this you know, I would love for people to say about us, "you know I'm not exactly sure about everything Community of Christ believes, but oh my gosh, do they love people they love to be with people, they draw everybody in. And they they want to be in conversation they they're not threatened by ideas that may be different than than theirs. They're willing to ask the difficult questions and engage in meaningful conversation with each other and truly listen to one another." And I think for me, I believe that in the midst of the global pandemic, and all of the struggles and challenges that we face, I actually believe we're in the midst of a global awakening, a global spiritual awakening, and I believe many who have walked away from organized religion are seeking spiritual companions to go with them, to walk with them on the journey and I believe we have the opportunity to become spiritual homes, in our in our congregational communities or small group communities, our online communities all the various forms and expressions of how we live out community for spiritual explorers. And what we saw sometimes called spiritual refugees, those who have kind of walked away from these organized forms but yet not found or connected with with a sense of spiritual home and are wondering and searching for a place to ask their questions, to explore hopeful futures and to make a difference for the common good of all people. And, and I imagine neighborhoods in towns and cities that are shaped by our courage in Community of Christ to start many more conversations around the table where we're aware, like in Acts 2. We're breaking bread, we're

sharing life. And we're grounded in our genuine care and curiosity and love for the other, I can see people gathering together to listen to one another again, instead of talking past each other, and and I can almost feel the energy and the creativity of people coming together to solve some of our greatest challenges locally and globally, inspired by our prophetic vision, as a movement. You know, there's all kinds of challenges we can name in terms of climate change, and, and and racial injustice and indigenous people's rights. And I mean, there's a long list of concerns and issues, but fundamentally, for me, I always come back to the words of Margaret Wheatley. And her call to us when she says, "I believe we can change the world. If we start listening to one another again." I still believe this. I still believe that if we turn to one another, if we begin talking with each other, especially with those we call the stranger or enemy, then this world can reverse its darkening direction and change for the good. And I know in all my heart, that the only way the world will change is if many more of us step forward, let go of our judgments, and become curious about each other and take the risk to begin a conversation. You know, Robin, I think if, you know, we're talking about discovering our context in the first century today so we can better understand what Jesus calls us to today in the future. But I also believe that part of that is understanding the context of the stories of the people of our world and the suffering that they are experiencing. And I am just fully convicted in my belief that if we can become a people that are willing to engage with people to take the risk to begin these conversations, to be willing to listen, that in the midst of those stories, we will uncover all the ways the Spirit has anointed us and invited us to become the peace of Jesus Christ in all of its dimensions in the midst of those situations and those relationships and Jesus was always willing to begin a conversation and I believe that that's where it all starts for us is we've got to get over our fear of one another. And we have to be willing to engage with one another in the difficult questions and become conversations that we need to have, that are about our future together in Christ as we seek to live out as a body, God's ultimate vision for our world, what we call Zion, and the peaceable Kingdom of God on earth.

Robin Linkhart 1:04:17

Ron, I'm aware that, as you said, you grew up in the church. You have seen monumental change in the life of the church, just in your lifetime. And as we talk about context, we're aware that we live in a context of constant change the digital age, I mean, just the rapid rate at which we're faced with shifts and transitions and mobility of our lives in the Western world and for those who live lives of poverty, constantly on the go, having to adapt having to figure out you know, where the next meal is coming from or where to seek shelter. And certainly folks who are immigrants in our world are also living, not only in in change, but in chaos and disruption in their lives. So you've seen a lot in the world, but also in the context of this faith movement. Tell us a little bit about what it was like to be a young, emerging leader in Community of Christ, and what it's like to be part of that journey of a movement and what you see from this juncture, as you reflect that perhaps you didn't see as you were living it.

Ron Harmon 1:05:45

Well, you know, interestingly, I was growing up as a young adult or an emerging leader, right on the cusp of the several decades of significant change we've been through as a church theologically and and, and really initially, but with things like questions about who should be

invited to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and, you know, considering our hearts, the core of our identity in terms of a name change about the fact that all are called according to the gifts of God, and that includes women. And I mean, so many monumental changes. I've seen us move from from more of a church centered movement to a Christ centered movement over time and what that has meant for us and all of those changes. For me as a young adult, on the one hand, were kind of exciting because I was I was this generation that was coming up that was like, wow, this is this is really something—what's happening in the life of a church. But also recognizing the just as significant, almost dizzying pace of change that we were engaging in the church. I think back on those times and I, you know, engage with young, younger leaders today and I often hear the, the, the kind of the impatience with the pace of the church sometimes with with particular issues. And one of the things that I think as I am able to now have a little bit longer view, as I look back to look forward is that I believe I've really, really come to value, what it means for us to move into the future as a global faith movement. You know, and I think we have learned so much about what it means to move together as a Christian community as a as a global faith Christian community in ways that honor the diversity that's in our midst. That honors the way that the gospel gets contextualized in different places around the world and how change is evolving on different timetables in different places. And that fundamentally, we want to be able to engage in some of these very important issues, but we also want to be able to say something to the world about how we engage in those issues together and to, sometimes to to jump out and to, to make, you know, really bold statements that sometimes folks want us to make that is going to create in that moment yet another division within the life of the church and ultimately another division of the human family. I have kind of come to appreciate the importance of process and how we move together as community and learn together as community and, and frankly at times how some of us bear the weight of, of where we are is not quite yet where we sense we need to be. And that's been very difficult for me personally at times where I've been. I've been out ahead of, of where the church has been in a particular moment. And that's been very difficult and, and I know at times, it's very difficult for some of our young emerging leaders who, who feel that same passion and feel that same way. Knowing that this is in a sense is how Jesus felt as as he made those proclamations. But I've also watched with with our journey to the US National Conference and, you know, inclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals fully with marriage and ordination. I've watched the wisdom, of paying attention to how we process through difficult issues, how we engage in discernment, how we engage in conversation, as community and so I really have a deep appreciation about how Community of Christ is growing. And it's understanding about how to do that and I can see my, you know, mid 20's self probably being very impatient with some of those processes, but over time I've come to learn oftentimes the wisdom of what sometimes may look like it's, we're not going anywhere, or we're stalling or we're, we're not being as aggressive as we should be. Sometimes we do have to provide the space for the Spirit, to work with us in community, as we share together as we designed together as we are in conversation together and as we grow together, in terms of what it means to be the embodiment of God's love, as a global faith community in the world. So I'm just deeply appreciative of that. And I have a little different perspective on that now, and that's not to say don't get impatient sometimes, because I do. But I really I do appreciate how we really are trying to be intentional about how we approach that journey together.

Robin Linkhart 1:11:54

So I have a tough question for you next. You've touched on this a bit as you've shared with us today. But I'm gonna ask you to zero in and if you had two sentences to respond to this question..

Ron Harmon 1:12:10

That is hard.

Robin Linkhart 1:12:11

Yeah, I know.

Ron Harmon 1:12:13

I don't even know what the questions is yet but I'm sure it's going to be hard.

Robin Linkhart 1:12:17

Dun-ta-dun-du. So, Ron, what are—and as I said, you have touched on this some—but but I really wanted to just go just a tad bit deeper in two sentences. What are your hopes for the church as we live into the future?

Ron Harmon 1:12:47

Well, I mean this in the deepest meaning of of what, what this means for our future, but my deepest hope is that we will risk, living fully into our identity and calling as communities of Christ, that can become truly a blessing to the whole creation, if we are willing to go where it beckons us to go, which is a deep and bold, relational engagement with our world. And I believe if we do that, I believe that we will continue to discover our future and all the ways we're called to be Christ love and peace in the world.

Robin Linkhart 1:13:45

Yes. Ditto ditto. So, Ron, is there anything that you want to share today that perhaps I didn't ask you about?

Ron Harmon 1:13:57

Not that I can think of Robin other than I just want to give everybody encouragement to continue the journey. If you could see behind me right now there's one bookcase of books. And there's five more bookcases like that in my home of books and another three in my office at the temple. Many of them have to do with the life and ministry of Christ. And I can honestly say to you that I still feel like I'm an infant. I still feel like I'm just barely grasping the mystery of the incarnation, and how I'm called to fully live that in a very challenging and complex world. And so I just want to offer my encouragement that what makes this journey so meaningful, is that we're on it together. And I believe that if we continue to remember that we're gonna be blessed with insights through our collective lenses and experiences and through the impressive the Holy Spirit as we continue to move forward on the bedrock of continuing revelation, which to me is what continues to draw us into the future one fateful step at a time.

Robin Linkhart 1:15:25

Thank you so much, Ron, for everything you have shared with us today. Thank you for making time to be with us. It has been a joy to have you here on Project Zion podcast today. Listeners I want to let you know we will post in the show notes where you can find not only the Herald article series, but also the follow up videos and discussions which are planned after each article is released over the next 10 months or so—we've already started this journey with a series of articles. And I also want to let you know if you would like to hear more podcasts with Ron Harmon, I would invite you to check out Episode 199 "A Prophetic People." And Extra Shot number 30 "Holy Grounds" where Ron talks about spirituality and guides us through a specific spiritual practice that he finds helpful. And Episode 73 "Leading Congregations in Mission." You can look for more episodes with authors featuring the Herald article series with host Karin Peter coming throughout the next 10 months. And thank you, listeners for joining us today. This is Robin Linkhart and you are listening to Project Zion podcast. Go out and make the world a better place. Take good care. We'll see you soon. Bye bye.

Josh Mangelson 1:17:08

Thanks for listening to Project Zion podcast. Subscribe to our podcast on Apple podcast, Stitcher, or whatever podcast streaming service you use. And while you're there give us a five star rating. Project Zion podcast is sponsored by Latter-day Seeker Ministries of Community of Christ. The views and opinions expressed in this episode are of those speaking and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of Latter-day Seeker Ministries or Community of Christ. Music has been graciously provided by Dave Heinze.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>