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Project Zion Podcast

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

Karin Peter 00:33

Welcome to Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host today Karin Peter. And we are sharing a series of interviews with all of the authors of the year long series of Herald magazine articles exploring the guiding question, "Are we moving towards Jesus, the peaceful One?" For those of you who are wondering what the Herald magazine is, it is the official Community of Christ magazine publication that comes out every two months. And you can find the Herald magazine at heraldhouse.org under the tab our faith. In today's episode we are visiting with Michael Wright. Michael has been on Project Zion before and so some of you will recognize his voice. But if you have not heard Michael before, he is the director of European programs at Duquesne University in Rome. His studies, his ministry, and his vocational interests around the globe have shaped his worldview and his discipleship. Michael and his husband, Antonio live in Rome, Italy. Very lucky man to be one of the few Americans allowed in Europe at the moment. So hi, Michael.

Michael Wright 01:47

Hello, Karin. Thank you. It's a, it's wonderful to be back on Project Zion. It's been a platform for my own journey into Community of Christ and beyond. So I enjoy listening to this podcast with my dog Domingo as we as we walk around the neighborhood as kind of a spiritual exercise so it's always good to see you hear you and to to learn from this, this platform. Thank you.

Karin Peter 02:14

Well, Michael, it's really good to have you here. Your Herald article in the Toward the Peaceful One series is titled, "Jesus as Refugee." And in it, you compare a number of things but one, the airport departure of your university students that you host in Rome, to the arrival of a group of refugees, why did you open your article with that experience?

Michael Wright 02:41

Well, Karin, I, yes. I direct study abroad programs in Europe and a couple of small programs in Africa for our university, Duquesne University. And so, of course, of course, intercultural experiences are super important to me. They were important to me as a young person, they formed my life. And it's exciting to see my students eyes opened to to the world. So of course, the first thing I wanted to do was to grab the reader's attention. But I also wanted to juxtapose and compare what was happening in the same space for different groups of people, there might seem to be more difference in these two groups of people than similar. For example, my students were in Italy as part of a planned educational experience, to work towards their academic degrees, and to learn about themselves and others. This experience is a critical experience for young people today, young people want to travel and study abroad, but as an experience full of privilege, while the 33 refugees that I talked about, who were arriving that same morning, that my students were departing, were coming to Italy to escape the horror

of war and violence in their own lives and homelands. But both groups have things in common to, they're both at ending points. My students had finished their three months of experience abroad. A time that was full of immersive learning, one that taught them about the world outside of the confines of the borders of the United States, and one that gave them a love for another place, culture, and people. The refugees just ended a scary part of their journey. Their long and harrowing travels that took them to the refugee camp in Greece, where they landed on the island of Lesbos. It was a horrific journey for so many of these people. Still, this camp was better than the violence they escaped from, maybe a type of limbo or purgatory before a hopeful ending. This was a time of beginning for both groups of people to for my students, they were going back to North America, full of new ideas and new understandings about themselves. They would be now taking their intercultural learning back to their families, communities, cities and nation. They would be taking their love for Italy and the other in their life to hopefully become changemakers in their country. And for a better world, perhaps a world where people will not suffer the way that these 33 refugees had suffered. And the refugees are starting a new life in Italy, they have been lucky in a way to be part of the humanitarian corridors program that I write about. That helps these and other refugees to fly to Italy stopping the crossing and rubber boats, that all too often Indian drowning and tragedy. They had places to live supplies to start their new Italian lives, and helpers to get them through the asylum process. My students were going home on a path to global citizenship. Their privilege makes the global citizenship a process and a choice. Where these refugees were forced to become global citizens crossing borders, learning to communicate with others, and learning to live among the poor who escaped war and violence in squalid conditions. Now in Italy, they will hopefully be able to integrate into their new Italian lives.

Karin Peter 06:19

You then narrow the focus a little bit because you introduce us to two individuals. Is it Fateme?

Michael Wright 06:30

And it's Fateme and Kobra.

Karin Peter 06:32

Fateme and Kobra. So tell us a little about them, their mother daughter fleeing Afghanistan, that there's more to their story. So you take it from this broad picture at the airport. And now you're going to kind of introduce us personally.

Michael Wright 06:48

Absolutely. Well, we knew they were coming because we had. So our university is housed with the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth in Rome, they are a Polish Order, who are dedicated to, to family and education. They're they're present in the united states and cities like Pittsburgh, and Chicago as well, where there were big Polish communities, immigrant communities, and we just happened to find each other in Rome. We were looking for a place to renovate and, and in the right feeling to host the Duquesne students, and they were looking for tenants, they needed someone there. So we've had a long, long relationship with these incredible women. And the sisters pulled me aside and with the assistant director just just before these, these folks arrived and told us that the Holy Father, Pope Francis had reached out and asked for them to house to refugees coming to women, a mother and daughter pair. And so I asked the sisters, well, this is exciting. And what do you think about it? And they

kind of looked at us like, well, we don't we don't know, you know, they were fearful of bringing the other into their home. They were they were they were nervous and scared. But the sisters deeply love Pope Francis. And of course, we're going to do what he had asked. Pope Francis has been encouraging religious communities in Rome as a shrink with the gigantic properties in our in the Eternal City, to open their spaces up to the homeless, to the elderly, to the refugee. That's been a complicated process for a lot of these communities that have often been closed to themselves, a place of prayer and quiet, and also a place of, of being the same. That's why happens in a lot of faith traditions and faith communities. Our sisters were really, really open, of course, because they host to 60 rowdy sophomore Americans every semester and may love them and pray for them. They had had, you know, over 10 years of experience of opening themselves up to the other, but they were still nervous. Yes. So Fateme and Kobra arrived that morning, I happened to be walking with the students down the corridor in the airport to get them checked in and I ran into a journalist friend of mine. Her name is Claire. And I said, "What are you doing here?" And she says, "I'm here covering the the story of the 33 refugees coming with humanitarian corridors this morning." I said, "Well, two of them are ours." And I told them who they were. And I said, well give them a pre hug from us, you know, as as they came in. We gave them some time to get settled, we knew that it would be difficult for them to land in a new country and to end a painful journey. And I think that I moved to tears here because in some ways, I have no idea what they went through. But I myself am an immigrant too. Now it is true that I am a privileged immigrant. I chose to come to this country. I came legally. I was supported by my work. I'm now today a citizen of this country. But I know even in my own privilege, how difficult it is to land someplace that you don't know anybody. And you don't know the language. And you're making friends. And it's years before you really understand the inside jokes and what's going on. You go to bed exhausted. Your head's exhausted. You're trying to figure out how to be calm and how to adapt and how to integrate. And I had an easy, and still tears come to my mind. So we gave them time to be able to arrive, to take a deep breath into the Italian winter that was just settling upon us, and to find themselves at their new home. We told the sisters that as soon as it was appropriate, we would love to meet them. And so one day out of the gate house where they were hosted. One of the sisters took us, we knew they weren't English speakers, or very little English. We knew that they were not Italian speakers, and that they spoke Persian. And that's outside of all of our linguistic abilities at my campus. So we went with, we went with smiles and with warmth, they opened the door to the gatehouse and greeted us with that same warmth. I was, I was a little nervous, because I'm a man. And these women come from Taliban, Afghanistan, I wondered if I would be welcomed, or if I want might create fear. Or, of course, I knew I couldn't kiss them. As we kiss each other customarily in Italy to greet. I knew that I couldn't hug them as I would normally hug as an American. I stepped back and I let the sister and my assistant director Elena take the lead as women. And as we we met together, they told us a little about their journey. It was complicated linguistically, to really get the story, but we knew that they had had other family. I knew this too, because I had seen an article on the Guardian website, there was an article called We Never Chose This Place: Refugees Use Art to Imagine a Better World. And I can give you that link for show notes later, Karin if you'd like, but it's good. It's art that comes from that refugee camp. One of the things that was there at at at the Moira camp in Lesbos was a nonprofit organization that was helping people with their trauma through art. And I found out that Fateme was part of this program. And so, if you go to the site and look at this, you can see a self depiction of Fateme, and two brothers and sisters. All we know, linguistically is that they lost people along the way. I don't know if that means that they physically lost those people in some kind of way. Or if they died, and I still don't know. But there was loss no matter what, in their journey. And yet

they they grinned ear to ear they wanted to make us something and their little house. They told us it was the safest biggest place they had ever lived in. This was a gate house made for for maybe a night night guards person or or a janitor. And they were so so happy. She was beaming, because the day before she had been called to an audience by Pope Francis who gathered those 33 refugees together. And she, in her great excitement, painted Pope Francis and was able to present it to him personally, and he accepted it with kindness and graciousness. It is at that audience that Pope Francis called the Mediterranean the shame of Europe. And he also had been given some time before by a Catholic relief agency, a life jacket from the Mediterranean that was floating that had obviously been with someone in it that had lost their life. And this is called The Migrants Crucifix. And it is, the cross is wearing this life jacket. Very much maybe like our our unknown soldier at Arlington or in places in the world where we, we we honor the dead that we do not know who lay there. This was someone's and they lost their life. So the crucifix wears that jacket and it is in the Belvedere courtyard in the Vatican Vatican Museums. Visitors can see it in the big courtyard as they come through. It is nobody yet it is everybody. And I think it's a wonderful call there. So we didn't know what to give them as a gift. Everybody had done everything for them the sisters and provided a beautiful warm place to live. The Sant'angelo community had set up their asylum and immigration paperwork. They were, she was soon to go to Italian High School and to Italian language school and then off to the fine arts high school so she could learn a trade. Everyone had done everything. But I remembered back to when I was new in Italy. And what learnt what helped me become a fluent Italian speaker. I remember it was television, and going to the movies. So we decided to give to them a television, we thought it might keep them from feeling so far away from others, it might bring community in a virtual way into their apartment, and they could start to learn the language of their new land.

Karin Peter 15:36

Michael, I was really struck as you were sharing different points of Fateme and Kobra's story, because it, it links, I think, in a way to kind of where, where you went next in your article. So you said that, that when we talk about or try to understand the experience of refugee that we have no idea the difficulty of one's journey. And that it can be years before someone feels at home or accepted or understands what the inside jokes are and the culture. So there's this long process of not feeling that you have a place where you are, and that you lose people along the way. There's loss. So in your article, you compare the story of this mother and daughter to the story of Joseph taking his family and escaping to Egypt, in the second chapter of Matthew. How did you, how did that unfold for you that realization of this similarity?

Michael Wright 16:41

Well, I'll take you a little bit through my process of how that unfolded. First of all, we all know that story. As Christian people, we've we've read it every December, as we get ready, you know, for the holidays, it shows up, we know it, but yet, it only shows up in one book of the of the Gospels, and it is a very, very short passage. So what do you do with that. And so that's what I had to think about as an author. First of all, I wrote a prayer for peace in my congregation in December of last year, as I had a lot of this on my mind, as I was seeing a lot of terrible things happening was continuing in Syria, with people fleeing a big group of people trying to make it to the Italian shores. And then also in the United States with at our southern border, I had met some people along the way, as I was feeling called to be come active or have some activism in this area. So I will share with that, that prayer for peace with you at the

end of this episode to close in prayer. I'm also a proud student of the Community of Christ Seminary. And one of the first things we learn in the seminary is that context is everything when we speak about theology, so that took me to the idea of being created in the image of God, or the Imago Dei. I've been thinking about this really in two ways. First of all, God freely becomes human. Through this ultimate revelation, or God's ultimate revelation, I should say, Jesus Christ. It is in Jesus that we understand so much about God. In turn, every story about Jesus is the human story of God. This means that if Jesus was a refugee, well, then God freely became a refugee. God understands what it means to be threatened by violence, the need to cross borders, and the difficulty to move to another culture, where language and customs differ. God understands the need for hospitality, the Samaritan along the way, who opens his or her home, pantry, and arms to the stranger. I think also that we have to understand that Jesus really was human. The story of Matthew is short and ancient. I wanted people to understand the complexity of Jesus, they traveled, the Holy Family traveled on a real road from Bethlehem to Egypt, most likely to Alexandria. This was an old caravan road that runs along the Mediterranean Sea to Alexandria, on the northern coast of Egypt, where a community of Jewish refugees had resided for, for decades for maybe a century. He's not only the Son of God, but he is hated. He has an accent. He speaks Greek and Aramaic. Nobody knows who his father really is. And his homeland is currently under the control of the Roman Empire. The New Testament shows us prejudice and stereotype. These are things we we suffer from all of the time is prejudice and stereotype and today, we would be able to recognize that can we recognize that anciently? Well Galileans despised by those in in Bethlehem. The famous question in the book of John is a stereotype. What good can come from Nazareth? Right? Nazareth in Galilee people are like who are the bumpkins in Galilee, like who is this Jesus? And could it be that there was no room in the inn that we learn about in the Christmas story? Because those in Bethlehem were discriminating against a Galilean family. I used Virgilio Elizondo text, "The Future is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet" for some of my language and understanding of Jesus's inter cultural nature. For those not familiar with the term mestizo, it is the term used in Mexico in the southern part of the United States to speak of those who are both Mexican and American, and yet are not fully Mexican and not fully American. Mestizo in Spanish gives the idea of mixture. Elizondo uses the term "halfbreed" which seems like a harsh translation to me, but yet not really far off to the way that these folks are treated in my birth nation. His book shows how we are all called to be mestizo. Whereas Jesus was intercultural. For example, stereotypes which cause shame in the Mexican American community, such as speaking, Spanglish can be seen as a blessing, bilingual abilities, and the ability to think differently than those who speak one language are blessings and gifts. There's a richness in the cultural implications of using the best of both languages, and the agility of mind code shift linguistically. He calls on Mexican Americans to embrace this part of their identity, and that it is a blessing and not a hindrance. That's just one example, from the 21st century example. And connects us with this, this complicated Jesus. The last part of understanding in the image of God is his understanding the creation of God's image that comes alive through the Holy Spirit. In Community Christ, we are connected to the Holy Spirit. And we have been since the beginning of our movement, there's no denying we we are a people that believes in Continuing Revelation as an Enduring Principle. We are a prophetic people. We are people with a with a prophet, a president, we are called to listen to the Spirit. Jesus is a place where we see God at work in the world. How do we recognize God in our modern world? Right? Jesus is ancient. How do I see him in 21st century? my neighborhood in Rome, or your neighborhood Karin in Washington State? Where is he? What does it mean to be created in God's image in our own lives? Jesus was God's only begotten Son. We learned that from the

scriptures. But does that mean that I am made in God's image? What about you, Karin? And our listeners, I like what theologian Yvette Flunder says in her book, *Where the Edge Gathers: Building a Community of Radical Inclusion*, she describes an infilling of the Spirit, when she speaks about the Pentecost experience. I think if we can recognize the power of the Spirit, the working of the Spirit and all of God's children, the life giving the Spirit, and the infilling of the spirit that happens within ourselves and others. And for me, this means God is present. If God is present through the Spirit, and is infilling "the other" then I think we can say that the person who stands before us is what God looks like. That means the millions of combinations of diversity that make up our humanity is to see the face of God right there before us. So to conclude this concept, this means that we see God in action in Jesus as refugee, then we come into contact with 21st century refugees. And there we must recognize God in action in each one of them. God's still wandering, looking for his peaceable kingdom.

Karin Peter 24:20

Thank you, Michael, for for that explanation and way of opening our eyes to not just refugee in Scripture, but refugee in our own experience. Which brings me to the next part of your article, which is kind of a difficult subject in the United States. It's one thing for us to talk about refugees elsewhere. It's another thing to talk about what's happening at the US/Mexico border. Sure. So you talk about that in context of Doctrine and Covenants 163:4, and I'll gonna ask you to share a little bit about that.

Michael Wright 25:07

Okay. Well, first of all, I knew that I needed to write about different refugee contexts from around the world. We're a global church. We're not a North American church, we're a global movement. And there are going to be people from all over the world that read this in the Herald and listen to this on Project Zion. And I am both a citizen of the United States and of Italy. I have the responsibility to my faith community, and to my two nations to make myself aware of oppression, to work towards rectifying that oppression, and helping others to be aware of it too. I knew I had to tell multiple stories from different regions of the world. I came to Community of Christ as a spiritual refugee. I was baptized a year and a half ago, this month. And if you want to know more about that long journey and story, there's another episode on Project Zion you can listen to. But this may seem to not be the same thing as those who journeyed from violence and war across many lands. But I assure you that my personal journey through the wilderness wrestling with my sexuality, and what that meant for my relationship with God, my family and faith was full of inner violence, and internal war. And death was never off the table. I don't mean to sound like my experiences the same as those that you've already heard of Kobra and Fateme, but I must be able to have empathy for them. I arrived at that empathy from my own struggles as a child of God, in finding a land of acceptance, my promise to land, my personal Zion, a place where my potential could be fulfilled. The new sections of the Doctrine and Covenants, which were not present in my former faith tradition, were wonderful affirmations of God's love for me, as Michael. These sections in this particular verse from Doctrine and Covenants 163 felt like they were speaking to me and calling me at the same time to move beyond myself. One morning in November of last year, I was having my breakfast and watching American news on the TV. My tradition is usually to watch American news in the morning with my breakfast. And then at night with my husband, Antonia we watch the Italian news as we have dinner together. So I saw a woman Her name was Hope Fry. She's the executive director of Project Lifeline, a very interesting nonprofit organization that combines legal help and medical help for immigrants and refugees in the United States. She was telling the story of having just been in the

detention centers or the "baby jails" as she explains them, she moved me. I have to tell you, I sit in front of the television all the time, and oftentimes I am moved in some way but I never I'm rarely moved to tears. As I'm always filtering information coming from the television. And she got me. I was moved to tears hearing her testimony of the cruelty she found in these centers, and that children were the receivers of that cruelty. In late November, we connected and we have formed a very nice friendship one of activism and awareness. She has told me so many stories of being in these hellholes, please excuse the terminology, run by the US government. I invited her in July to come to a community circle worship service on the worth of all persons, where she played a recording of children in a detention center crying for their moms and their dads, Mama Poppy. You can hear the guards at the same time making fun of the children. She tells stories of guards that tell her that it's better that these children are locked away here and possibly die here, rather than becoming gang members and threats to our society. This makes the Scripture and 163 even more powerful and alive. You can literally hear the mothers and fathers in desperation trying to get their children away from violence. Who does not want the best for their children? A future? But Hope's recordings give us an augmented picture of the Scripture. Of lonely children who've been separated from their lives. Loved Ones who cry for them until they can cry no more. At that point, they become mute and silent. She's witnessed it. she testified psychologically damaged. Hope is lost. Collaborating with this article came from a discussion with apostle Janne Grover in a Starbucks in independence. While I was at the seminary focus week in January, back when we could travel before the COVID emergency, I was talking to her about collaborating on the idea of doing something around immigration and refugees. Since this was a hot topic on both sides of the ocean, and I was trying to feel passionate about it. Pope Francis was speaking strongly against those who were anti immigration or anti refugee. We were seeing terrible tragedies here in Europe, our beautiful life giving Mediterranean Sea had become a graveyard, the shame of Europe, in the words of Pope Francis, he asked if I would like to write for the towards the peaceful one series, she asked me to write on the word displaced. In the verse we just were discussing with the focus on immigrants and refugees. And here I am, I humbly said yes, and took on the challenge to write so that that gives you a little bit of idea of how how that process came and and how those ideas were kind of flowing within me to be able to write the concentrated article.

Karin Peter 31:37

Michael as you, you go on to talk about Jesus's refugee and, and talk about God who freely became refugee in the incarnation. Let's hear the words from 163:4. "God, the eternal creator weeps for the poor, displaced, mistreated, and diseased of the world because of their unnecessary suffering. Such conditions are not God's will open your ears to hear the pleading of mothers and fathers in all nations, who desperately seek a future of hope for their children. Do not turn away from them, for in their welfare resides your welfare." As we hear those words, and listen to you describe how refugee has impacted you. Do you think this means or how Community of Christ goes forward, to respond to address and speak about immigration?

Michael Wright 32:49

Maybe just a word about the scripture before I address that one of the things that was really helpful to me as the author was to look at that scripture. Now I know in the series that's being written in the Herald, some that have already come out, and some that will come that there that the authors have been instructed to use the specific words that God the Eternal creator is weeping for. So the poor, the

displaced, the mistreated and diseased. And so you're going to see that coming back as we continually look at this scripture. So one of the things that was really helpful for me as an author was to remove the other words, and just use the one word that I was assigned to. So perhaps you could do that as the listener or reader as well, through each one of these articles that come. It really kind of focuses us because there's so much in this scripture. So that's one thing that was really helpful for me. I think it means we have several responsibilities as a prophetic people. One is from another scripture in Doctrine and Covenants 165:6a "Beloved Community of Christ, do not just speak and sing of Zion, live, love and share Zion. Those who strive to be visibly one in Christ, among whom there are no poor or oppressed. So we have believed in Zion in one form or another since the beginning of our movement in 1830. Today, we believe that the micro concepts of Zion from Kirtland have exploded in meaning, giving us our prophetic macro theology assignment today. We are called to reject abusive Empire and build an inclusive kingdom, in our communities, cities and nations. Now in Community of Christ, we'd love to sing and speak and even eat potluck around the idea of Zion, right? But what are we actually doing to build it? That's a question that I asked myself constantly, not about what you're doing to build it, but about what I'm doing to build it and turning it inward. That's easy when you're the only member of the church in a country. I have a lot of self discussions. But what am I doing to build Zion in the place that I love and with the people I love and the culture I love and in the world that I love so much? We're call to action. We're called to restoration. We need to find ways to not only use our hands and feet that we love to say in Community of Christ, the hands and feet of Jesus, but to become the voice of Jesus as well, amplifying, the weak, the small, impossibly the inexistent voice of the poor.

Karin Peter 35:35

I'm struck, by the, the way that you have talked about refugee and immigration, the displaced, and around all of the discussion, the word that seems to be woven in and around is hospitality. You frame this, from a perspective of hospitality from the sisters who didn't know what to do when you ask them, we don't know. And they were a bit afraid, but they offered hospitality to the hospitality of Pope Francis in accepting the gift that Fateme had made for him. So some listeners might be asking the same question you are, what am I doing? Or perhaps, what do we do? What can I do? And how would you respond to them from this lens of hospitality that seems to be, Michael, your lens.

Michael Wright 36:37

We love hospitality in Community of Christ. Hospitality is one of the things that that saved me, in so many ways. In my own faith journey. We're called to it to radical hospitality, we hear those words all the time. And that could be having people over, that could be bringing some soup to someone that's sick, offering the sacraments in the church reaching out, and I know I'm a human being, I know that the other is scary sometimes to us. It can be awfully scary. It can be scary to approach a person that doesn't look like us. That doesn't sound like us, that doesn't speak our language. And oftentimes, what do we do we reclude ourselves. And oftentimes, I think we we have the narrative running in our head, "Why did I do that?" What if that person needed me? Who cares if we don't speak together, I could have hugged them or help to them in some way. You have to, I know that you that the listener knows what I'm talking about because this is a human reaction. We do this all the time. And so of course, people coming from other places can be scary to us. But we have to be hustling splittable the next part that I'm going to, I'm going to respond to that question there. And it might be a little bit uncomfortable for some of our listeners. But I hope by this point in the interview, that you know, my heart, you know where I'm coming

from. And I hope that that indwelling of the Spirit in filling of the Spirit is with you. In this moment. These might be hard questions to ask, but they're essential. We have to get to know refugees and immigrants. If we can do this in person, wonderful. That's the best way. There's nothing like coming into contact with someone different from you, then to change our minds about people and to create bonds of empathy and friendship. How many times have people said to me, "Well, you're the first gay person I ever knew", right? And they had a lot of stereotypes about who I was to find out that maybe some of those stereotypes were right. But a lot of things were very different. And I just use that as one example, in my own life. And in my own journey, that probably many listeners have heard of, have to and I've experienced in their long lives, we get to know people, they aren't just a word or concept or a story or a vocabulary, or a term, or a derogatory term, or something that is evil or something that's coming for us something that's stealing from us, or somebody that wants to take our children or our jobs or our language, this is not what's happening. And as we get to know, these folks, we get to know them better. We will be better. And sometimes it's not possible to actually know somebody, and that's okay too. We can't beat ourselves up trying to find opportunities. We do have to be open to the spirit, but sometimes we're not going to be able to find it. If it's not possible to know or work directly with refugees and immigrants, then find an organization to support and uplift. When you see abuse, write about it to your local papers, you can send in an opinion piece, right? Write your government representatives, we must find something to do, even if it seems to be small to us. I recently learned in one of the European peace colloquy sessions, that when we write a letter to our senators, or our European parliamentarians, that they consider your voice to represent about another 1000 voices who feel the same way but didn't write in. Now, that's powerful. I always thought that if I wrote a letter that was just me, and what good would it do? But if my letter represents 1000 other people, how powerful is that? We have to believe refugee stories. People do not pick up and risk the lives of their families and children on a whim to get rich in Europe or in America. It's not happening. We must put ourselves in their place. If gang members, drug dealers, sex traffickers were after your children, would you leave? If you're a prosperous nation was thrown into civil war, and buildings were crumbling around you, starvation was setting in and your children were no longer surprised by death and decay. Would you leave? If your family was in danger of extermination? Would you leave? Would you choose to go to a different country, culture, language, or people already hate you because of your status? Or maybe because of your faith on a whim? Because it sounds fun and interesting? I don't think so. Would you risk slavery as you pass through northern Libya? Would you risk having your daughter taken by traffickers on the road? Would you risk rape and exploitation on the immigrant trail? Would you risk drowning in the sea? Would you risk dying of thirst in the desert, all to try to reach another country or having your children separated from you at the border and placed in detention centers where you may never see them again? Just because the European Union or the United States seemed like they might be a fortuitous place to live. We live in the 21st century, where we rarely admit to miracles. But in the case of Joseph in the New Testament, the earthly father of Jesus, he was warned by an angel. Who are we to say that these people are not inspired to to leave? They were not called to Exodus, that they have not wrestled with the idea of self imposed exile. I am an American who went to college in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and the United States. An incredible city, beautiful city, built by immigration continues to be a city that is blessed by 21st century immigration today. How have immigrate immigrants and refugees blessed your nation, your city and community? What about your own family? What are your roots? Did your family emigrate? If they did, what were the conditions? Why did they cross the border or a sea for a new land? Karin, these are questions we have to ask. They are so important. And lastly, not to give away the article. But

I asked three questions in my article. These are probably the most important. Do we see Jesus in the refugee? And even more importantly, does the refugees see the hospitality of Jesus in us? And have we created a peaceable kingdom where they might be welcomed? Those are questions that we all must ask. I think individually, I think as communities and I think as a church too. These are questions for us to ask. And we have to arrive at a point where we will loudly shout. Yes.

Karin Peter 44:14

Thank you, Michael, for sharing with us as we explore and try to discern what it means to move towards Jesus, the peaceful one, as we understand Jesus as refugee. You've given us a lot to think about, to discern together and hopefully to move forward in our own response to the hospitality, living the hospitality of Jesus. I understand that there will be some follow up videos and discussions planned after each Herald article was released. Can you share how our listeners find those?

Michael Wright 44:56

Sure thing. First of all, I think on the Community of Christ main website, you can, you can type in the series Toward the Peaceful One and find information. I think as they as each article is coming out and there's more information, they might become more, more focused on the on the front page. But this is what I know about the article that I was part of I know that the article will be published in the Herald's November/December issue, that Matt Frizzell's IGTV reflection video will be released in mid November. And that there will be a zoom discussion that I will be part of, along with other members from the Western European mission center on December the seventh at 7:30pm. Central Standard Time in the United States where Independence is, that's 2:30am European. So those will happen.

Karin Peter 45:56

Wonderful listeners, I hope that you, you participate in those that you read the article, and that you participate by watching the discussion as well. Now, Michael, when we talked earlier, you talked about as part of your new journey and Community of Christ that you had been writing prayers for peace, and I shared that we actually use some of your prayers in the resource Sacred Space for small group worship, and that they are beautiful, articulate expressions of your hope for peace. So would you close our episode today, Towards the Peaceful One with a prayer? And before you do that, I'll simply thank our listeners. And Michael Wright, I'm Karin Peter, this is Project Zion Podcast. Michael?

Michael Wright 46:52

Before I read the prayer, there might be some names here that might be unknown to you, but I will be using the name the names of the Holy Family in Spanish and an Arabic along with English in this prayer. "God of refuge, Jose' is awakened, startled at the violence in his Pueblo. The screams of neighbors, the invisible Annunciation of exile, no place to raise a child, no hope or change in sight, destruction and corruption threatens his family. Yusuf is awakened, startled by the sound of bombs and artillery. The sound of crumbling buildings around his newborn baby boy. Esau announced the only alternative, "Leave!" War and death threatens his family. Father God, who are we to say that an angel did not appear to warn these holy families? Are we people have such little faith? Maria walks in faith, the long treacherous road lined with wolves and thieves. Her vision is of a promised land, a place of refuge and stability. Her dreams at night, a warm home and a peaceful future for her little one. Miriam covers the child waves Yusef on and they flee into the night. kilometers on foot. hitchhiking

occasionally, she suckles her child in the back of a truck, headed for other lands. Her vision is to live in peace. her dreams are about her child living his potential. Mother God, who are we to say that dreams and visions didn't occur? Is not anything possible with our God? Jose' and Maria arrive at the hurdle, the border between violence and stability, Jose' taken by gangs for ransom. Maria told she cannot enter. She leaves Jesús who can now walk to walk the last steps with a transparent envelope of documents around his neck. She kisses him goodbye and points him towards the border guard. May God protect you she whispers know that I love you. Maria remains alone and vulnerable in Matamoros. Yusuf and Miriam arrive at the hurdle, the sea between violence and stability. Youssef decides to brave nature. "I will call for you come for you. Once I have arrived in a place of stability and peace." Miriam and Esau rely on the mercy of locals, eventually finding refuge in a camp with deplorable conditions on the Isle of Lesbos. God of innocence. Why do we keep them locked out of the kingdom? Who are we to say that violence didn't exist, and they are better in their hunger, loneliness, misery, and vulnerable states. Jesús cries himself to sleep, soiled and hungry, swaddled in a mylar blanket on a cold detention center floor. A choir of hopelessness comes from the children who take care of Jesús. José and Maria are not to be found. Yusuf is swallowed by the sea. His hope cut short. His last thoughts of Miriam and his sweet Isa, Father, take my place and guiding them to safety and welcoming into your arms. Miriam knows not the plight of her husband, and awaits and hope, her prayer for salvation. God who speaks today, why are we not there to tear down walls of separation and to build bridges of understanding? Why have we not replaced our stop signs with green lights of welcome? Behold, this is the Holy Family. Joseph, José, Yusuf, Mary, Maria, Miriam Jesus, Jesús, Esau, and all others who suffer. They may not look like us, sound like us. But they are us with the same desires and dreams of hope, joy, and peace. Our prayer is to understand how to live the words we received from you, eternal creator. Help us to dry your tears through abolishing poverty, finding the displaced, loving the mistreated, and as we seek cures for the disease of this world, help us to understand how we can make unnecessary suffering no longer necessary. Help our ears to be open to the pleading of mothers and fathers and all nations who desperately seek a future of hope for their children. Help us to have the courage to not turn away from them. We recognize that in their welfare resides ours. We plead for the stories and journeys to change the happy ones, ones of redemption, ones of restoration, ones of Shalom, in the name of the one who was displaced. Amen.

Josh Mangelson 53:08

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