

387 | Percolating on Faith | Atonement
Project Zion Project

Josh Mangelson 00:17

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

Carla Long 00:31

Hello, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla Long, and today you're listening to percolating on faith with Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith. Hello, Charmaine. Hello, Tony.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 00:44

Hi, Carla. It's good to be here.

Tony Chvala-Smith 00:46

Hi, Carla. Nice to see you.

Carla Long 00:47

It's wonderful to see you. Thanks so much for being here, back with us today. And you guys just worked so hard for Project Zion, I'm going to put in a request to double your salary, double it, double it. That and like 20 bucks, you could go out to eat almost.

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:04

And ya know, Carla, when you do double our salary, we're going to take you out on that.

Carla Long 01:09

Oh, lucky me.

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:13

How do you feel about Taco Bell, Carla? You know how I feel about Taco Bell. It's a little embarrassing to me. But anyway, um, I'm just so appreciative that you always say yes. And today we're gonna' be talking about something that we don't talk about in Community of Christ all that often. And so to tell you the truth, I don't feel like I know that much about it. So, I'm going to be learning just as much as everyone else today, I have a feeling. So, we're going to be talking about atonement. And I can already, like, hear people in Community of Christ going, Whaaaat? So, I kind of feel like our first question should be, What is atonement? What are we talking about?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:54

Right. (Yeah.) Well, and I think one of the things that that we probably just need to do is that sometimes when people hear it, what they get, what they, what comes to mind, is kind of a popularized idea of it in

Christian culture, which is, is actually more, probably more like an evangelical definition of it. And that's kind of the default that people go to. And, and that's sometimes called substitutionary atonement, the idea that Jesus had to die because we're all sinners and God wanted to kill us, but kills Jesus instead. So, you, are you familiar with that one? Have you heard that one?

Tony Chvala-Smith 02:35

it's sometimes called penal substitution, meaning penalty, right? That, that Jesus is paying the penalty for us that we should have paid. And it's, in some ways, it's kind of a problematic way of thinking about the God-human relationship.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:50

And, but the other problem is that that's sometimes all that people think of when they hear, hear the term atonement. And, and probably just even from the way that we've described it, you can see the problems with that as far as Community of Christ theology. It, it paints a very harsh picture of God who has to, to get justice through violence. And it, and there's this sense that some people have, have characterized it as cosmic child abuse, you know, that God, you know, kills his son kind of thing. So, there's a lot of issues with it. And consequently, lots of reactions when you say atonement, but most people don't realize that that is one understanding of atonement among many, but it's the one that you hear most, and it's the one that causes most reactions for those who don't have a particular view of God as an angry judging God who requires punishment and, to be satisfied. So, so that's often the reason either we don't talk about it, or that we make our distance from it, you know, individually, and sometimes as churches, as well. So, what we want to do is start again with where you started with what does the word atonement actually mean? And then look at some of, there's just a beautiful variety of ways of understanding atonement through, that come through Christian history. So we're going to unpack a few of those. And I think you'll probably see some of those that are, are embraced by Community of Christ people, and even by the church as a whole. So anyhow, so the first thing is atonement, Tony. Let's just, let's just start with the word, the word atonement. The English word comes from around 1600 or so. It's from the 17th century. And it's literally "at one meant". In other words, it's a, it's a Middle English word to try to describe the reconciliation of a relationship, an "at one", a coming to "at one". And (So, like, "at one" between) two parties who are estranged in some way. And so, um, this, this was a word that Middle English translators of the Bible use to, they created to describe, or to translate certain texts from the Hebrew Bible, and certain texts in the New Testament. So the, the, the basic idea, though, if we go back to the New Testament, is that in some sense, Jesus's death affects some kind of reconciliation between humankind and God. That's the underlying idea. And it's really important to know that the New Testament does not give a, a fully worked out theory about that, does not lay out, Alright, so here's what it means and here's how it works. Instead, what the New Testament gives is a lot of different images and pictures and stories. Right? So, some of the stories are stories we typically read over really quickly. We don't even pay attention. For example, in the gospels, the story of when, when Jesus is arrested, and Pilate says, You, you, alright, you guys, you you have this, you have this custom where I let somebody go at Passover. Do you want me to let Jesus of Nazareth go? And they say, No, give us Barabbas. And there's

a kind of a, there's a kind of a play on words going on there because in Aramaic, Barabbas means son of the father, literally could mean son of the father. And so everybody reading the story knows that the criminal, the guilty, criminal Barabbas, the guilty son of the father, is let go, and the non-guilty Son of the Father is crucified. So that's, that's embedded in the story. But the thing is, New Testament doesn't just go with that image. There's, there's all kinds of images. Reconciliation, the image of, of, of Christ's, Christ's love covering for us. The use of the term expiation in some, some texts of the New Testament. Gosh, the, yeah, go ahead Charmaine. Yeah, I was thinking of in Luke, the idea of what Jesus' life and death is, is example. This is how we live. If we're going to follow Jesus, then being willing to follow Jesus to the death is part of following Jesus. So, that Jesus' death is more like a, a test. Are you willing to go with, follow Jesus and the kingdom that Jesus was talking about, to death. So there, Jesus is the example giver. The, the, the one who we follow, and his death is, is about

Tony Chvala-Smith 08:10

It's a, it's a noble, the noble death of a prophet that we are, that followers are to imitate if they find themselves in similar position. You know, there's all these phrases in New Testament. Christ died for us, . . ., on behalf of us. Christ died for our sins. Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 08:34

Which you might have heard in the last few weeks with the Gospel of John. And especially in the first chapter, John the Baptist calls Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world.

Tony Chvala-Smith 08:47

Another one is, you know, Christ is the expiation of our sins and the Greek texts there who use that word, the Greek word hilasterion, which is the way, the Greek translators of the Hebrew Bible use that to, to translate the mercy seat that covered the Ark of the Covenant where blood was sprinkled. And so there's all these different kinds of images for the meaning of Christ's death in the New Testament. (Did you mention ransom?) I didn't, no, I didn't mention that one.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 09:15

Ransomed, redeemed, those are all words as well that, that more are like us, gaining our freedom because Jesus was willing to, to be replace, to take exchange places with us. So, that so, but that's, that's different from that one that we're so reactive to. So, there's a whole lot of different ways of understanding what atonement meant to the, to the first Christians and for the Christians in the first century. So, not just the people around Jesus, who are saying, What do we make of this thing that happened? Jesus died and then he came alive again. And so that death really raises lots of questions and possibilities about what is it that God is saying through this. But then for the people, a generation or two later, who are the writers of the New Testament, and they're trying to put words on it in new situations that they're finding themselves in. And whether it's trying to make sense of it in a, in a very literary kind of Greek world where it needs, there has to be reasonableness in what one is saying. So there's that need to make it more articulate. But also, in contrast to some of the philosophies and eventually some of the

heresies that come, it's like, How do we, how do we more concretely describe what it is that Jesus' life and ministry, but also especially Jesus' death? What does that mean? What does it do? What, what effect does it have?

Tony Chvala-Smith 11:04

And then what's the relationship of that death to his life, and of that death to His resurrection. And so it's really, it's maybe easy to forget, or maybe we never learned, that most, nobody really expected a Messiah who would be publicly executed. And so after Easter, the disciples when they encounter the risen Christ, and that, one of the things they have to try and start making sense of is, What did it mean that he was killed? What, and, and so, one of the places they go to is the Hebrew Bible. In other words, they're trying to make sense of their experience. And one of the places they go to, obviously, is to the Hebrew Bible, and they go to sacrificial imagery. But that's not the only place they go for images. In other words, something about this event of a, a Messiah being crucified, was so mysterious and so powerful, that they just are grabbing everywhere for images to try to put some words on it. And so that's why, you know, the New Testament doesn't work out a single view of it. It has multiple kinds of images and hints. And so then, in subsequent Christian theology, what happens is that, is that thinkers try to say, What actually does it mean that Christ died, pro nobis, for us. What is the meaning of the "for us"? And so atonement theologies then explore, particularly explore what is the meaning of the death of Jesus Christ who is the, who is divine? What does it mean that the word of God who became flesh died? What does it mean that Christ, who is Emmanuel, died? What. what is that "for us" about? So that's, that's where atonement theology starts?

Carla Long 12:49

Well, this has just been already kind of mind blowing for me. And I wonder if it is mind blowing for our listeners as well, because, like, the prevailing, the prevailing theme is always that God had to kill Jesus in order for us to have our sins forgiven. And I think the very first time I heard that that wasn't the case, I was an adult, you know. I, that, I mean, it's just so easy to believe because everyone believes that. And it's even sprinkled into some of our hymns, maybe our old timey hymns that I grew up singing, and that God had to kill Jesus. And then the second, I think it was Terry Read who said to me, Well, did God really have to kill someone in order to forgive you? And I was like, What? No, I guess God didn't. What? How could that be? Whoa. So, I mean, this is, this is just really, really exciting to hear because I, what I hope that we leave our listeners with is some other ideas of how they can think of the atonement. And I don't know if you're ready to jump into that if you have some things for us, but we would love to hear maybe some other ways to think about that.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 13:58

Well, we've come up with at least nine. So, uh, so, and we've tried to come up with some catchy titles for them, as well as, you know, proper titles. And so we'll, we'll go through that. But here's one of the things, the, so though there's lots of different interpretations of what atonement means, all, almost all of them have some things in common, even the nasty one that we're, we're saying isn't the whole thing.

Well, and here's the other thing, is that quite often, all of these, we may be aware of different meanings of atonement, some of these different understandings, but we may have collapsed them all into one and don't realize that we actually have bits and pieces of several different ones that we're using. So, but most of them have in, some elements in common. One is that Jesus reper, represents God's love. That Jesus' life and death is in some way representation of God's love. That Jesus' death has purpose or meaning. Doesn't mean it was intention, you know, it had to happen. But it, it, but that there is something in Jesus' death that has an effect or meaning. And then the, the idea of reconciliation, that there's something in Jesus' life and death that reconciles people and forgiveness can be part of this. People with God reconnects them to each other. There's lots of different ways in which that, that is seen. And that Jesus' death and resurrection point to some future reality. That's another element that's implied if not articulated. And then all of the models are concerned about the divine human relationship. And so these are some elements that you'll find in almost all of the atonement models that we're going to be talking about. So, when, when we're going to do it is historically.

Tony Chvala-Smith 16:08

Yeah, and I want to add one thing before we jump into historical and that is, so in terms of in terms of Christian theology, it's really important to know that, while the ancient creeds of the Christian church, the seven ecumenical councils as they're, as they're called, they, they dealt with issues like the nature of God as Trinity, the nature of Christ as fully divine and fully human, the nature of the Holy Spirit as fully divine as, as, as coming from God, fully divine through Christ. Those things that were dealt with by the ancient creeds remain really important touchstones for all, pretty much all Christians today. And that includes Community of Christ. We don't use the creeds, but we, we, we affirm the basic truths of them. However, there was no ancient Christian council that ever once decided that there's only one true model of the atonement. Here's where we get that. We get that from Protestant fundamentalism, which had as one of its fundamentals, substitutionary atonement. That's the only one. They taught that that's the one true model. And that was a departure from centuries and centuries of orthodox, universal, Catholic, Christian teaching. So, I think that's really important for us to know that there is no, there's no formal universally agreed upon document in the Christian church, that, in Christian tradition, that says, Uh and there's also just one model of atonement.

Carla Long 17:39

Those darn Protestant fundamentals. They mess up our theology all the time I feel like.

Tony Chvala-Smith 17:46

It's actually a constant problem isn't it?

Carla Long 17:48

It is a constant problem, because there are more and more conversations I have with you two. And, you know, you talk about how this is a modern invention. This is a modern thing, you know, all these things

that are kind of messing with people's heads, because it's easy to understand, or, you know, like, that's what they've heard their whole lives. Those Protestant fundamentals. I'm just telling you right now.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 18:08

Well, they're looking for absolutes. And that's the problem, because then you start carving away the nuances and subtleties and the multifaceted aspects of God and Jesus, and faith and doubt, and hope and all of those things, and you make it into a formula. And that's so that you can have all the answers. And that, and that's the problem with any kind of fundamentalism, and it's especially true here. And we'll, we'll look at some of the reasons why this one particular kind of atonement model is really appealing to those who want absolute answers.

Tony Chvala-Smith 18:44

Carla, you know, that classic, that classic Christmas movie, A Christmas Story, you know, about Ralphie and his bb gun's fun? The Protestant fundamentalism is like Bumpus' hounds. It's like, they're, they're just out, they're, they're barking, they're always getting in, they're always making a mess and always (They hijack the turkey) They do. They hijack everything. So think of fundamentalism as the Bumpuses' hounds of Christian, of the Christian faith.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:10

Well, and they do. They hijack the language. (They do.) They make it narrow, and often punitive. The idea of grace and God's love gets truncated. Anyhow. So

Carla Long 19:25

Yes, yes. Thanks for that, for, that's very helpful imagery for me. Very helpful. I was thinking just now, Tony and Charmaine and I could probably come up with a very good word for Protestant fundamentals. Maybe for a later podcast. So now let's maybe it's time to jump into some of those models. And like, tell us maybe some ideas of what we could think about when we think about atonement, rather than God has to kill someone.

Tony Chvala-Smith 19:52

Right. We're going to give you, the first three models we're going to give you are the oldest models, the ones that, you know, if you took a course on Christian theology, these are the models you would cover. But remember, we have nine we're going to work with, but these three are the ones that we would start with So,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 20:05

And the ones that are articulated earliest in Christian thought.

Tony Chvala-Smith 20:09

So the first model is, is a very old model. And it goes back to the second, third, fourth and fifth century church. And it's sometimes identified as the Christus Victor model, Christ the victor's the Latin title for it. And it's connected with people like St. Athanasius, and St. Irenaeus and so on. And our, our catchy title for this, the, the memorable title for this is, (Trick the Devil: Gotcha). That's how this model works. So, this, this model by these different ancient theologians, they, they use images from the, from the New Testament, and so early Christian theologians like Irenaeus, they see the human condition, not first in terms of guilt, but in terms of bondage. Human beings are in bondage to evil powers. And if we postmoderns have trouble imagining that and we start thinking a little demons running around, which the ancients might have, just remember, we deal with, we deal with personified powers all the time: racism, sexism, heterosexism. These, these are powers that have the capacity to distort human life. So that's, so think in those terms. And so what, in the ancient church they saw these personified powers primarily as sin, capital S, death, and the fear of death, and the devil. These, these, these were the three, the three great powers that held human beings captive. So Christ as fully human in this, in this model is like he, he's swallowed, he's swallowed up by the demonic powers in his crucifixion, right, the, the, the Empire crucifies him. It's, it's the demonic powers at work there. Christ, the human being is swallowed up by death.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 22:03

He allows himself to be swallowed by death.

Tony Chvala-Smith 22:07

And so that, in that respect then he's becoming a ransom. He's, he's being he's, he's this, this payment, you know, that, that, that the evil powers need to be satisfied. The thing is, it's a trick, because he's fully human, but he's fully divine, too. And so as divine, he rises from dead, from the dead, the dead on Easter. And then in that's, in that respect, that breaks the back of the evil powers, and their grip on humanity. Humanity, then, is, is free from that point on to follow Christ, to seek the good, to serve God. So that's the, the image of the Christus Victor model.

Carla Long 22:48

It sounds like a great movie.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 22:51

It does, doesn't it?

Tony Chvala-Smith 22:53

It is.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 22:53

It's like, it's like tricking the devil. It's like, Okay, Jesus, this, this envoy of God, trying to make the world a better place, but he dies. And then he's in this view, in, in the clutches of, of evil, of Satan, of death. And, and voila, you know, he no longer is, and he shows those powers for what they are-- insufficient to match God's care and love for people.

Tony Chvala-Smith 23:23

And so in this sense, the, the church fathers would say, The meaning of the phrase Christ died for us is that he, he, he entered into these powers, he allowed these powers to swallow him up, and then on our behalf, rose from the dead, (broke them open) and broke them open. And so we're no longer captive, no longer captive to these, these personified powers. And so there's actually a certain ethical power in this. We are, we do not have to be cap, because of Christ we do not have to be held captive by fear, by fear of death, we could say by racism, sexism, and so on. Christ has broken the back of those, those powers. And what remains for us, then, is free, freely to resist them from that point on.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:09

And so, in some ways, this would be kind of some of the roots of liberation theology today. This idea that, that Christ's willingness to show us the, the weakness of those things we fear, and that, and that have imprisoned us or enslaved us, gives us a kind of freedom.

Tony Chvala-Smith 24:36

So that's the, that's the Christus Victor model. It was very popular in the ancient church. And it came back a little bit in Martin Luther's time, the Reformation, then came back, some theologians brought it back in the 1930s as they're facing fascism in Europe. It, it makes some kind of sense there. So that's the first, the first of the, we'll call the three classic models. The second classic model is, yeah, go ahead Charmaine. Main purpose. Yeah.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 25:01

We also have given a kind of a main focus to each of these. And so the main focus for the Christus Victor is Jesus frees humanity from hostile powers. So that's the, the main focus. It's more about the nature of who Jesus is and what he has power to do.

Tony Chvala-Smith 25:17

So, the second of these classic models is the substitutionary atonement model as articulated by St. Anselm of Canterbury, right around the year 1100 or so. And, and so our catchy title for this one is

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 25:33

A Price Required and Paid. So this is the one that, that some people have made as the one and only way and they take it in a harsher way than it's originally formed as well.

Tony Chvala-Smith 25:45

I start thinking, Charmaine, that another catchy title for this one is, Check, please. God, God is, God is asking for the check and it's like, We don't have any money on this, right? So, so Anselm is a medieval person. He's built, he builds on, uses a lot of medieval social imagery as he tries to articulate what it means that Christ died for us, died for our sins. And some of its kind of legal imagery which he borrows from the New Testament. So, the idea here is that humanity has incurred an infinite debt to God, right? So we are, we are in debt to the lord of the manor. It's a debt we can't possibly pay. Right? But it has to be paid, but we can't pay it. It's too big. It's infinite. The only one who could pay it is someone who is infinite themselves. And that would require a god man, somebody who as human being would, can represent us, but somebody who as God has infinite resources to, to pay this, this very large check that we can't, we can't pay. So, so that's exactly for Anselm, that's exactly what, what Christ is. Christ, Christ's death is this payment. This, it, it makes satisfaction for a debt we cannot pay. And then that, you know, sets us free from the power of sin and guilt to (when Jesus right takes care of that). Yeah, yep. So in other words, the relationship is restored. By, by, by Christ, in a sense, stepping in and fulfilling the requirements of justice.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 27:33

But here, too, this is a sign of Divine Mercy, that God, God's self has made a way for this debt to be paid. So, that's, that's something that kind of gets lost, again, in modern day version of this.

Carla Long 27:55

Yeah, like, but this, and this is the one that, I just want the listeners to hear it, this is the one that everybody talks about. This is the one we were talking about earlier, right? This is substitutionary atonement. This is, this is the one that we hear all the time. And it came from such, it sounds like such a softer place rather than what we ended up with it now. So, listeners, this is what we have been left with.

Tony Chvala-Smith 28:17

The rea, the reason you're actually hearing the medieval version of it and the harsher version comes a few centuries later, later in the Reformation. And then Protestant revivalists take it over. In other words, Anselm doesn't, doesn't really articulate that all these guilty human beings should be put to death, doesn't really articulate it that way. It's John Calvin and some leader reformers and then the Protestant revivalists who go that route. That's the one where, where you start hear, where it's kind of a, it's kind of a, a deterioration of this model in the sense that, you, you, so we're, we're guilty, and we deserve to die. Right? And so that gets really messy because then God, God needs to kill us. But then Jesus takes it for us. And then this is a sign of divine love. And it sounds like some kind of horribly abusive relationship actually. (Yeah, exactly.) So, and lots of feminist theologians have, have said, This model perpetuates the abuse of women. And they, they can articulate that extremely persuasively how this, how that, that kind of deterioration of the substitutionary model gets used against women constantly like sending, sending women back, ya' know pastors who send a woman back into an, a really abusive relationship saying that, saying that they need to follow Christ's example and just, you know, and then just be

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 29:43

Sacrifice themselves (Right, right) for this because maybe their husband will come to know God because, yeah, anyhow. So, one of the, so there's in this one, there's two focuses, or two foci, I guess is the right way to say it. So, the first one is that human sin is a problem. And that's where I would say evangelical fundamentalists today tend to put way too much of the focus. It's on our sin. That's, that's the real focus. And then God has to figure out a way to deal with it. And, and that way, but in that way, human sin becomes the focus. And those who tend to be self righteous or to feel like their sins aren't really nearly as big as those other people's can use this kind of, We're all sinners, but you're more so because you won't even acknowledge that this thing that you're doing that we think is a sin is a really a big sin to God. So, it, it gets used in, in abusive ways, I think, because instead of God's mercy being the focus, people, the problem is people's sinfulness. And then it's all about us, isn't it? You know? So the other focus is, in this one, and probably the more important one, is Jesus, the god man, willing to pay the price. Willing to free us. So.

Tony Chvala-Smith 31:19

So yeah, I mean, so there's a, there's a truth to this one that's worth hanging on to that is, if you think about life, people are constantly making sacrifices for each other. (Sure.) Right? All during the pandemic, people who have worked in supermarkets have made sacrifices on behalf of others.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 31:36

And in hospitals (And in hospitals.) First responders. Yeah.

Tony Chvala-Smith 31:39

And so I, motherhood, not something we've experienced, but motherhood, fatherhood, that is raising children, having children, there are sacrifices involved in that. So, there's, there's (Like your sleep forever.) There's, there's an element in which the universe itself has a sacrificial element and the sun is slowly dying, it's slowly giving up its energy. And in the meantime we live because of that. So that's a truth of the substitutionary model. But it's so, it's so prone to abuse, you just have to be really careful with it. So

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 32:13

And it's so prone to making God a thing to fear, of, of a being to fear, and, and to not sense gentleness or grace from.

Carla Long 32:25

I remember when I took a course in lit, film and religion, and one of the big parts of that course was to find the Jesus character in all the movies, find the one who sacrifices themselves in order for the good and happy ending. And so that's what it, that's what it just reminded me of. Every movie we watched, one of the first questions our professor would ask is, Who was the Jesus, Jesus character in there? Who

sacrificed himself? And so, you know, that idea of Jesus as sacrifice just continues to, it's in our movies, in our books, and our college classes, apparently.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 33:00

And, you know, and there's some of these atonement models that have some others that have it as well. But in this one, it's not completely voluntary on Jesus' part. It's required by God, by this skewed sense of justice. And so, yeah, so especially that sacrifice that is demanded is consistent with this particular model.

Tony Chvala-Smith 33:32

Yeah, Anselm some, uses the word necessity a lot. It's a necessity. So, that's, that's problematic. So, let's go on to the third image, the third classical image. And this is what's sometimes called the moral influence theory. And it goes back to a medieval lover by the name of Abelard, Pierre Abelard.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 33:51

Who got in trouble (Who got, who got in) because he really loved loving.

Tony Chvala-Smith 33:57

And, and the, the young woman he was trained, he was, he was hired to tutor in theology, they got to tutoring in a very different way. And the young woman's uncle did not particularly like Abelard's form of tutoring even though these two were in love. And so, it's, it's a story for another time. I won't go into what all happens. But, but, so, Abelard's model, we, here's, here's the title we've given to it.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 34:18

What's Got, What's Love Got to do with It? What's got. Yeah. And it's, but we would say, the answer to that is everything. So, for Abelard and for this moral influenced model, it, it starts and ends in love. And so, go ahead Tony.

Tony Chvala-Smith 34:36

So, yeah, so, I mean that this is the one, Abelard didn't like Anselm's model, so he re-frames it. In medieval universities, theol, theology professors disagree with each other, which is kind of cool when you think about it. So, so Abelard says, What does it mean that Christ died for us, died for our sins? And he wants to go to the idea that this is, this actually is God's supreme act of love for us and to, to see that portrayed, you know, portrayed on the cross and to learn about it. And of course, medieval people would have seen this in the mass every time the mass was celebrated because it's about, it's really about the crucifixion. To, to learn this, to learn about this divine action on our behalf, the idea is that it's, it will awaken in us, a responsive love for God. And that love that's awakened in us by Christ's cross, it influences us to change our heart and our direction and our, and, ya' know, change our life in a different, in a better way. So Christ's love kindles our attempts to love God, and his, Christ's love is particularly portrayed on the cross and then it redirects us, right?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 34:47

So this is the idea of love blossoming on the cross. God loves us this much that God will go this far to show us how much God loves us. And, and Christ's action in, on the cross is, is to tug at our hearts, and to see and take in this love, and then want to respond in the same way, in this kind of love that gives. So here the, the action of Christ on the cross doesn't change anything in God. It changes stuff in us. (Right.) So that's why sometimes called the moral influence or the subjective model of atonement. And that's where forgiveness comes in, too. You know, we respond in love to God's love for us. I mean, that's what forgiveness is, right? God's loving, acknowledgement, acceptance of us. And so our responding back to God in love completes the cycle of forgiveness and frees us then to love in new ways.

Tony Chvala-Smith 36:50

So the focus here is the nature of God's love calls forth our love. Right?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 36:56

So, yeah, it's focused on, Who is God? What's God about?

Carla Long 37:00

That's really interesting. That's an interesting one because, like, it kind of feels like it gives up a lot of control, you know, and, and just lets, it sounds actually very Community of Christ to me in some ways. I don't know if this is true or not, but, like, we have in Community of Christ, we, you know, we take the responsibility on ourselves to do, to make those changes, to do those, be those people and this sounds like something that we could get behind. I don't know if that's true, but

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 37:24

I think we are behind it. And we may not even have known it, but if you've ever heard anyone, and I'm sure you have, complain, that, Oh, in the past, we used to have these rousing sermons that told how we were the one true church and everybody else was wrong, or that, you know, talked about, you know, the, the, the prison house or fire and brimstone. And now we don't do that anymore. All we talk about is love. Have you heard it? You know, people say, oh, bla bla bla, love, bla bla, you know, what, what are we talking about? But that's what's here. That's what this atonement model is all about, is acknowledging that God, first and foremost is love. And Christ as representative, representative of God's presence is love in our midst.

Tony Chvala-Smith 38:18

So that's, that's Abelard's model and we'll go on to the next one.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 38:23

We've got nine and we're not going to get through them all. But we wanted to introduce you to a few of them. So we'll probably do a couple more.

Tony Chvala-Smith 38:29

Yeah, we'll, we'll, we'll have to drop off here in a minute. So, so the fourth one

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 38:35

is, we're, we're calling Joining Us in Woundedness. And this comes from Julian of Norwich, which her dates for her life were 1343 to perhaps about 1416. And our little catchy title for this one is Ditch Salvation. And we'll explain a little bit about that, but that's a nice one to, that will capture this. Ditch Salvation is what we're calling this one.

Tony Chvala-Smith 39:09

So, we don't know this woman's actual name. She's called Saint, or she's called Julian because that's the church she was attached to, St., St. Julian's church in Norwich, England. She was an anchoress, which means she was, she took a special monastic vow, in which she entered a small little building attached to the church, and was given last rites as she entered that. She was entering that for the rest of her life, withdrawing from society, at least from outward society, in order to, to be there to pray for the church and for the town. And so, to make a, to make a long and interesting story short, she has a near death experience. And in that near death experience, as the priest is saying last rites and holding a crucifix in front of her, she has a series of visions. Now she, she doesn't die actually. She has a series of visions and then she writes a book out of those visions called Revelations of Divine Love. It's one of the most unusual and really magnificent texts of the, of medieval theology that you'll ever read. It's quite, quite profound. And so her, her visions then are in response to seeing Christ on the cross, right? Christ, Christ on the cross becomes real for her as she's dying. And she, what happens in these revelations is she kind of completely rethinks medieval theology on the nature, on what, what Christ's death is about.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 40:29

Right. And so how she describes it is in this vision is that she sees this person who has experienced God's love and God's call, and, and they get up, and they start running to God. And for no fault of their own, they, they stumble, and they fall into a ditch. And they're injured, and they can't get out of the ditch. And they forget, they can't see God's loving gaze on them anymore. And they despair. And if you think about, you know, the places where people go, the guilt places, the shame places that people get stuck in, you know, but she, she has completely taken out of this, this model, that there's any shame or fault on people's part. They were, they were running towards God and they just, they accidentally fell in a ditch. And they couldn't get out by themselves.

Tony Chvala-Smith 41:37

And, and it's clear when you're reading this, this, this little story that's it's in, I don't know, chapter 51 or 52 of Revelations of Divine Love. When you're, when you're reading this story, it's clear that this person is Adam, who represents all human race. And so she, instead of, instead of understanding Adam's fall in terms of guilt and culpability, she understands it in terms of human beings becoming wounded. It, it

totally shifts the nature of what, of, of sin and finitude and the human predicament. It's a different, completely different way of thinking about the human predicament. We're wounded, we need to help in our woundedness that's our situation.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 42:18

And so she's looking at Christ, on the cross, on the crucifix, and what she sees is Christ's life and death is, and, and Christ being willing to be wounded, is Christ crawling into the ditch with us. And there reminding us that God's loving gaze is still on us. And helping us to find wholeness again and to see clearly that God is still there.

Tony Chvala-Smith 42:55

So it's, it's a, quite a, a warm and loving and humanizing way of looking at Christ's, Christ's death. It's, you know, Christ joining us. And the, the issue is how, how to help a wounded humanity. And it's so pertinent to her time she's, she lives in the 14th century. The 14th century, absolute worst century ever to live in, Carla. That's the century of the bubonic plague. It's the century of the 100 years war. It's the century of crusades between Christians in Europe and it's just a miserable time to live. And so, as one scholar notes, you know, as all these wounded soldiers are coming back from a crusade, an English crusade against the French, you, if you can imagine, these are, these are both, all Catholics, ya' know, fighting against each other. And all the, as these, Shelly Rambo's, the scholar describes, all these wounded veterans coming back to Norwich and what Julian must have heard and saw from her little anchor hold as these people came back to Norwich.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 43:56

Because one of her roles, she had a window that, that looked into the sanctuary of the church so she could re, could be part of the mass and receive Communion. But she also had a window to the outside where she was there as counsel and spiritual director to anyone who came to her window. So, yeah, so that's I think that's a pretty cool one.

Carla Long 44:19

I mean, 2020 was not a great year, but at least we had, like, Netflix and stuff, right? Like, she didn't even have that. Like, that's horrible.

Tony Chvala-Smith 44:27

And running water and, and, and, and no, no rat fleas in our house, Carla. So, there you go.

Carla Long 44:33

Well, then thank God for that. Oh, that's so sweet. Christ, Jesus Christ sounds so kind in this one. He, like, getting in the ditch with us. That's (Yeah.) so kind.

Tony Chvala-Smith 44:47

Yeah. I mean, Julian, Julian depicts a god you can actually love which I think is quite, quite powerful. So, so what will, that, the focus of that when is a God who meets us in our woundedness. That's what Christ dying for us shows us. And, so, let's (Do you want to go on to the next one?) Yeah, we're going to jump to what would be our sixth one, jump over our fifth one. We're just do a couple more. And this one is one that's, that's less well known, but it's from the late, the late 18, early 19 hundreds. It's connected with theologians like, like Forsyth and Dinsmore, and this one is that the cross is the revelation of God's suffering, God's suffering with and for the whole creation, right? So here, we have, we have a nice title for this one.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 45:33

So our little catchy title is Love Hurts.

Tony Chvala-Smith 45:38

If you know the Nazareth song, right, it's, it's, that's what this one is totally about.

Carla Long 45:44

I feel like you guys are only picking these now, because of your catchy titles just, that's what I feel is happening. (And maybe, may be not.)

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 45:53

We wanted to pick the ones that have some unique thesis to them. So that, but yeah, that helps.

Tony Chvala-Smith 45:59

So that this one, um, and, gosh, it's so, it's so, so powerful in terms of late 19th, early 20th century European life and all the suffering that, that goes on. But in this one, that, theologians are saying that this is what it means when Christ dies for us and for humanity. In the cross of Christ, what we see depicted is what has been true of God, always. Right? This is, this is always true of God. That God shares in the creation, suffering and travail. And one of these theologians, C. A. Dinsmore, this is 1906, this is, this is his, I love the statement of Dinsmore, he says, There was a cross in the heart of God before there was one planted on the Green Hill outside Jerusalem. And now that the cross of wood has been taken down, the one in the heart of God abides, end quote. In other words, Jesus', Jesus' death on our behalf shows us what's true of God, that God has always been and always will suffer for creation. It's just a breathtaking image of the nature of God sharing in creation's travail. So, I think it's beautiful.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 47:16

And so the focus in this one is obviously about the nature of God, that God has always shared in creation, suffering, of which the cross reminds us.

Tony Chvala-Smith 47:27

And there were some, some writers and poets after World War I who drew on this kind of imagery to help make some kind of sense, if they could, of all of the scarred and battered and wounded veterans that came home from World War I to England, and just, just absolute, absolute misery that many millions of people killed. And, and the, the idea here is not you, you don't understand it in terms of culpability. You understand it in terms of the cross shows us that God, God has been suffering this way for us all along, and that God shares in that in that suffering of humanity. So, it's a whole different way. In other words, sin and, sin and guilt are not so much the issues here, but mortality and, and theodicy and human, and human misery and suffering are the key issues here. So

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 48:16

So here are the catchy titles for the other ones that we haven't, that we haven't done. Let's we won't tell you all of, all of what we said, but we'll just give you the catchy titles. So one of them is the Christus Victor Remix, which is Martin Luther's. And then Soul Renovations.

Tony Chvala-Smith 48:38

That's, that's William Temple's. The idea that Christ's death on the cross shows us the lengths to which God will go to help form love in us. So, it has some similarities to, to Abelard, but still different, too.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 48:51

And then God Goes to Hell for Us. Which sounds like a song, too, huh?

Carla Long 48:57

Did you just tell God to go to hell?

Tony Chvala-Smith 49:01

God went there. So on the cross, God went there for human beings. That's, that's Jurgen Moltmann that, who's still alive. But it connects his experience of being a German soldier who was captured and didn't realize what he was actually fighting for. But then in prison camp, he realized he got to see pictures of the death camps, and realize that's what he has been fighting for all along. He didn't realize it. And the, the, the guilt and despair just about destroyed him until he read the story of Christ's crucifixion in Mark where Jesus says, My God, why have you forsaken me? And that's, for him, that's like, that's a god I can believe in. Because that's how he and his fellow German soldiers felt after the war.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 49:45

And that's where his theology of the atonement began. And it's, it's, again, another take on it. And then the Taking the Fall for Us All is the other catchy title, which is Christ as the ultimate scapegoat. And, so, that, that Christ becomes the scapegoat, so that no one else has to be.

Tony Chvala-Smith 50:07

Right. And this, this is connected to the French, French philosopher Rene Girard and to American theologian Mark Heim. And, and they, they, they try to understand the nature of scapegoating in human experience. And that the idea is that when, when, when Scripture says Christ died for us, the, you, you, you can interpret that in terms of there own need to be any more cultural, social scapegoats. We don't, we don't, we don't have to take the people who are other and do stuff to them because we're afraid that they bring contamination in this kind of stuff. It's a, in other words, it's a, it's a really, there's a really powerful, Mark Heim's book is titled Saved from Sacrifice. Like, that all of our cultures, including American culture, live on the idea that we have to sacrifice stuff and, and, you know, lots of people during the pandemic were willing to sacrifice everybody, so they didn't have to wear a mask. And, you know, it's like, and Heim, Heim is, like, saying, Oh, for goodness sakes, you know. And we talked about veterans that way, all the time, that they sacrifice for this, and that. What if we sent them to a war that was a giant mistake, right? You know, then they became scapegoats for bad national policy, right? And so, anyway,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 51:17

And so here, he's, they are looking at Christ as, as being the scapegoat who helps us realize what we're doing. And, and is that reminder that, that that's no longer needed? That that's, that is not the way to, to go forward. So, anyhow, that's the short version of (Well, this has been) those other ones just on the edge there.

Carla Long 51:44

Well, yeah, absolutely. So, um, just so you know listeners, you can, uh, we're going to attach a document so you can look at the other ones if you want to. So, you can have a little look-see what that, what Tony and Charmaine have worked on. But I have a final question, I think, for you two. And, you know, we've heard maybe five or six different theories of atonement. How do we choose one or which one's the best? Or how do we what do we focus on?

Tony Chvala-Smith 52:10

I guess, I would say is don't pick one. (Yeah.) Right? Don't pick one. (It's a buffet.) It is. It's, it's a, it's a, it's a christological buffet. But I think that, you know, the cool thing here is that God the Word became flesh and blood and was murdered by the Roman Empire. And the early Christians realized somehow that this was on behalf of us. This is, we're in the middle of, we're in the middle of something that you can't spell out, you can't turn it into a theorem, you can't turn into a math problem. You can't, sorry, Carla, you can't turn into a math problem. You can't, you can't turn it into a doctrine. It's too big.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 52:52

It has too many faces. It's multifaceted. And, and all of them might be worth taking in. Maybe not embracing solely, but taking in because each one is trying to say something about who is Jesus, who is

God. And they're, they're based in life experience. They're based in Scripture, and they're based in the long story of Christianity.

Tony Chvala-Smith 53:22

And also they say things about us, too, and to us. So, sometimes I need to, I just need to be reminded, God is with me in my woundedness. And sometimes when I look upon the misery of creation, I need to be reminded by the cross that God shares in that. And sometimes I need to be reminded that I'm Barabbas and that I've done and said stupid and really harsh and bad things. And I need, I need, I need to be forgiven for them. So, in other words, the, the models speak to different parts of our lives and different parts of our journeys. And I would never want to, you know, short myself on any of them by picking one, which is actually how I do buffets, too, Carla. I don't.

Carla Long 54:12

Believe me, I've seen it. I've been well aware of how you do buffets, Tony.

Tony Chvala-Smith 54:24

But also I, also I think, you know, for people who have been harmed by one of these models, avoid it. And recognize, don't, don't give up, don't give up on Good Friday because, because somebody, somebody taught you badly about the meaning of Christ's cross.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 54:41

Or, or didn't know, or didn't know that there are so many different ways of understanding what God, what Christ, what humanity is, is offered in, in Jesus' death, life, resurrection, suffering, presence, all of those things.

Tony Chvala-Smith 55:04

I am, I'm reminded of that, that marvelous statement Bonhoeffer made in, in his letters and papers in prison. He says, Only a suffering God can help. And that's kind of what we have here. That's, that's the, to me, the beauty and the brilliance and the genius of this aspect of the Christian faith connected to the cross of Christ.

Carla Long 55:30

Well, this has just been fascinating, so fascinating. And I really hope that we've given people just a huge look at what the word atonement means. It doesn't have to be scary. It doesn't have to be a scary word at all. It can be a word that understands different aspects of who Christ was. And I just think that is so fascinating. And so cool. Thank you so much for all the work that you put into this. That's awesome.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 55:53

Well, this is actually this is something we've been working on about once every two years. And we still keep saying we need to write something more extensive on this. So each time we add more to it. So, so

this is like the third incarnation of trying to write something down. So hopefully it would be helpful. And some starting places.

Carla Long 56:13

Yeah, that's really cool. So, thanks for offering that for us. I really appreciate it, you two. Amazing job. Thanks so much. Is there anything you want to say that you didn't get a chance to say?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 56:23

Um, just that as we think about Easter being an Easter season, it gives us room and time to spend, spend some thought, spend some reflection on some of these different aspects that of who, who Jesus was and is, how does God's love come to us? And to, to not just go with the easy Palm Sunday. We got Palm Sunday. We got Good Friday. We got Easter Sunday. And, and now we're done because that's all that we need. There's a, there's that whole season afterwards is a chance to say, What did that mean? What does it mean to me right now that God has unmasked the weakness of death?

Carla Long 57:18

That's beautifully put. Thank you so much. Um, yeah, we shouldn't jump away from Easter straight to the birthday of the church and Pentecost, right? Don't jump from Easter to birthdays. Let yourself really feel it. I always ask people during, at least during the Easter week, the week leading up to Easter, I'm like, Let yourself feel it. But it sounds like we need to let ourselves feel it after Easter as well. (Yep. Yeah.)

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 57:39

Be curious. Let the mystery meet you.

Carla Long 57:43

Awesome. Well, thanks so much, Charmaine. Thank you so much, Tony. This has been a wonderful podcast. I really enjoyed it.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 57:48

We have, too. Thanks.

Josh Mangelson 57:52

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