

395 | Percolating on Faith | Hell
Project Zion Podcast

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 00:32

Hello, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla Long and today I'm welcoming back Charmaine and Tony Chvala-Smith. Hello, you too!

Tony Chvala-Smith 00:42

Hi Carla.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 00:43

How are you doing?

Carla Long 00:44

I'm great! It's so good to see you and talk to you. If you're here with Tony and Charmaine, and I'm here, too, that means you're listening to the Percolating on Faith series and we always talk about, you know, like, important theological stuff on here. And I'm trying to remember we're talking Oh, hell, what are we talking about today? Oh Right! We're talking about hell!

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:09

This topic or other.

Carla Long 01:11

Hell! Oh, my goodness. So we were, I was approached with an email, I don't know, a couple months ago, with someone who is a regular listener, thank you so much for listening, and asking us what we would say about Hell. She said a lot of different things in her email. But she also said that she recognizes that Community of Christ doesn't talk about Hell all that often. But because we didn't talk about how she kind of had to build what Hell was on her own. And so she had to, like, you know, listen to what her friends were saying, or maybe listen to what other churches were saying, or listen to what she sees on TV or hear it reads and literature or whatever. And so she kind of had to build that herself. And she recognized that she didn't really have a great picture of what Hell is and what Hell means and are we going to Hell? So anyway,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:07

Well some of us!

Carla Long 02:09

Charmaine! So I approached Tony and Charmaine about the idea because I really think this could be a question that a lot of people have, and they agreed. So we decided to, you know, talk about Hell so...

Tony Chvala-Smith 02:21

Carla, we said, "Hell yes! We will talk about Hell!"

Carla Long 02:24

Of course you did! And gentle listener, we have promised each other that we are going to use the word Hell as much as possible, because we...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:32

We don't get to use it much else, right?

Carla Long 02:34

Exactly. We hardly ever get to say it. Mom and Dad, please don't be listening to this. So I'm going to hand it over to Tony, I'm not going to ask a question. I'm just going to hand it over to Tony, because I know I can see on his face, he has something he wants to say.

Tony Chvala-Smith 02:48

I well, where I'd like to start is why this topic is important for us to do some really deep theological thinking about because this topic has the capacity to damage people's lives, right? And all of us know people who have been severely bruised and wounded by the misuse of this concept. So I'm going to give you an example. So I'm going to think back quite a quite a number of years to when my mother's parents, my grandparents were still alive. They were marvelous, lovely, wonderful retired farmers. And my grandpa Walworth was just a solid, caring man. And I'm not even sure how we got on the topic. But he was in his 80s. He was in his mid 80s when this came up. The only time I ever heard him talk about this, he was remembering back to when he was six years old, almost 80 years. And let me add, Grandpa Walworth was not a churchgoer.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 03:57

From all the time you knew him.

Tony Chvala-Smith 03:58

All the time I knew him, he was not that much of a churchgoer. Of course, he would go to weddings and funerals and so on, but not a regular churchgoer. And I don't even remember how we got on the topic, but he started talking about his childhood. And he remembered to a time when he was six years old. And you know, growing up on a farm in southern rural Michigan, and his mother took him to a tent meeting. Right some tent preacher was passing through and having, you know, meeting revival meetings and his mother took him to attend meeting and 80 years after the event. This is what grandpa said, I remember

vividly, he said, Oh, he said, "The preacher scared me so bad with all of his preaching about hell, that I couldn't sleep that night." This is my this is my strong, solid farmer, Grandpa Walworth, who was a gracious and thoughtful person. 80 years he remembered back And there's no other thing, no other word I can find for this, but he was traumatized by somebody preaching about Hell to a six year old, threatening a six year old, with damnation and Hellfire and destruction. Alright, so that's why we need to talk about how, because that kind of abuse and bad interpretation of Scripture, and traumatizing people with religion that goes on all the time. So we need to talk about, we really do need to talk about Hello, Carla.

Carla Long 05:32

We do need to talk about hell, that is horrifying. Because when you when you scare someone with the thought of Hell, that they're gonna burn in Hell for all eternity. That is absolutely the opposite of God, if fear is the opposite of love, and God is love, that is the opposite of what God would want for us. And that just drives me insane.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 05:53

Right? And this is one of the places where we really have to begin asking the question, why is the concept of Hell so important for some people, and, and we'll go a little bit more into that later. But it's because people want to use it as a power tool. So you think about parents or preachers who try to control people's behavior by threatening them with hell. And the thing here is that they're using as the measure for what will get you to hell, the things they don't like. So it actually is separating you from the concept of who is God to this list of you have to do these things, right? Or you're, you're out of here, God won't want you if you don't do this list of things, right. And so that's one of the reasons there is this need to talk about it is because for lots of people, that misuse, they overuse, the emphasis on how has short circuited their individual's ability to have a relationship with God. Because God has only been put out there as something to fear someone who's going to punish them for not being perfect. And we all know if we're honest, that we're not perfect. And so there's always well, maybe Carla, you might be perfect. But for most of us, that awareness, then leaves a sense of insecurity, and how can you have a trusting relationship, a loving relationship with God, if what you've been taught to nurture in yourself, is fear of God, because God can punish you forever, whatever the picture of Hell is, that gets drawn up after that. And so it's it's like, some little parts of Scripture that again, have been pulled out and used as a weapon, for the benefit of the person using the weapon, not for the benefit of people having a real relationship with God.

Tony Chvala-Smith 08:07

And if you think about a collar, you just kind of put your finger on this a few minutes ago. What do we make of a relationship that is based solely on self interest and self protection? Right? And so when when, when people when people have a, quote, relationship with God, based on primarily based on not wanting to be, (what do I get or not get?) I don't want to be burned up. (Or I'll get heaven if I do these things.) It's hard to it's hard to see that as a relationship based up based on love. Love is not about self

interest. It's not about self protection. It's about vulnerability to each other, it's pretty hard to be vulnerable to a figure who is who is depicted as basically wanting to torture you. And so how, how can we, how can we have a loving, trusting, open relationship with the Divine who is an other if we imagine that that other essentially wants to hurt us? So that's another reason why it's important to get to this topic, and especially to know who is it that he was using these ideas? And why did they use them this way?

Carla Long 09:16

Yes, I, so let's jump into it. So before we get to that question, Tony, let's talk about how the concept of Hell developed.

Tony Chvala-Smith 09:24

Sure, well, the word is there in different translations, sure. It's there.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 09:29

And we did a little search and in actually in the New Testament, and all of the New Testament, all 27 books, to think about that 27. There are only 13 references to Hell, and some of them in the original Greek were the term Gehenna, which we'll talk about a little bit later and not not a fully developed idea of Hell, as some Christians might think of today. And of those 13 Seven are in the Gospel of Matthew. So over half of them are in one gospel in one book, three are in Mark, one is in Luke, and there are none in John, or any of Paul's writings. And then Hades, which is when Judaism, and then it Christianity, Judaism becomes, us right, when Judaism is Hellenized. And that's the the Greek, the Greek translation of the Old Testament is written. And then as Christianity develops within this Greco Roman world, they start using the term Hades, which is a Greek concept and from Greek mythology. And and as they're using it to describe how they actually start taking on some of the Greek views of what happens after death. So it's kind of a, we'll use your term and then we we end up shaping our view of health based on some of the Greco Roman mythologies.

Tony Chvala-Smith 11:16

So in the Hebrew Bible, the primary word used to describe the the abode of the dead is the Hebrew word Sheol, right? And it's, it typically, typically simply means where the dead go, all of them. So when the, when the Hebrew Bible is translated into Greek, the primary word that the Greek translators had was Hades or Hades, from from classical Greek thoughts.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 11:39

But in the New Testament, the term Hades is is 10 times and twice and Matthew, Matthew is really into this, obviously. And then a couple in Luke a couple in Acts and four in Revelation, but always in Revelation. Death and Hades is a phrase. So it's talking mostly about death in general. So that in the New Testament, that's it.

Carla Long 12:05

I was thinking of the word Gahanna when I mentioned that hell isn't mentioned because I kind of I can't think of the Gahanna part is really interesting, I think, because Gahanna was actually outside of our hotel. When we stayed in Jerusalem, supposedly. We're looking out on the Hell Kusama.

Tony Chvala-Smith 12:24

By the way, there's also a city in the name in Ohio by the name of Gahanna, Gahanna Ohio.

Carla Long 12:31

I bet it's beautiful. So So tell us a little bit more about that.

Tony Chvala-Smith 12:37

You're that the term that the term traces itself back to to Hebrew words, Ga Hinnom known which in Hebrew means Valley of Hinnom. The Valley of Hinnom is a ravine that on the South outside the south south Southwest. And this ravine this ravine had a nasty history. So in the era of the kings like this roughly 1000 down to 587 bc in the era of the kings, there were Judean monarchs who practice something really horrible in that valley. They practice child sacrifice. And what's what we think was happening is that the one of the one of the many local Canaanite Davey's Moloch, was a God who you might offer your firstborn child to literally by burning them, right? So there's references in the Bible to the passing of the firstborn through the fire.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 13:34

So so some historians would say it meant fully sacrificing them and for others, it may have been a symbolic passing through the flames. But either way, it says this is an again another of those evidences that early Judaism ahead had multiple, multiple gods that they were kind of playing playing with.

Tony Chvala-Smith 14:05

So sometimes the Judean kings would would do this and so that that gave this ravine that kind of a nasty negative association. And then later on, in a later period, that that ravine became something like a garbage dump, right? So it was, you know, I probably a lot of our podcast listeners might not have memories of town dumps that actually smoldered right, a landfill outside of town that was burning. I, I remember one in my hometown of Clair, Michigan. And so the idea is that this this, this disgusting place where child sacrifice took what took place also was this, also came to be a dump that

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 14:49

It's at the bottom of the hill, right?

Tony Chvala-Smith 14:50

Right. So there was fire there.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 14:52

So, that's what often happens with piles of garbage that if they start to be burned, then the burning kind It goes underground. And so it's always smoldering and little flare ups of flames here and there.

Tony Chvala-Smith 15:06

So since this place was then already considered unclean, you know, there, there's evidence that criminals were buried there, too. So, Gahanna is not a really nice name for a town actually. It's, it's describing a place where child sacrifice occurred, thus making it in a cursed place. It's a place of burning of refuse and trash and a place where criminals were buried. And so that the image of Gai here known as this a cursed place, where bad things happen, and where and where malefactors went, where their bodies went, became an image in Judaism, roughly by the first century before Jesus started to become an image, a symbol a metaphor, of divine judgment after death. Now, here's the here's an interesting side note on that, for almost all of the Old Testament, there's no concept of life after death, except that everybody dies. Everybody's shade or shadow goes to Sheol where the dead, remember, nothing they might get. It might be a kind of a shadowy consciousness there, but they can't praise God. They're cut off from the community. It's just a kind of a shadowy existence where you simply fade away, but what changed then was when Jews and exiles came into contact with Persian and when it's like, almost like, late into the four hundreds BCE, as Judean exiles in Babylon are coming into contact with Persian thought, which did have a very kind of robust afterlife concept. And then as, as then Charmaine mentioned as Judaism becomes hellenized, and comes into concept contact with Greek concepts. This the idea of a life and a punishment or reward after death, became a way to solve a certain problem, that Israelite and then subsequently Jewish thought had and the problem was, for most of the Old Testament, there's no there's no rewards and punishments are worked out in this life.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 17:13

Right God, and only in this life, yeah, divine divine justice has to be worked out in this life, because everybody the good, the bad, and the ugly, all go to Sheol after they die, and there's not any differentiation. And, and so what happened? Can I jump? (Yeah, please.) So So what happens if somebody does something terrible, and they aren't punished by God in this life? And it appears that they get off scot-free, or maybe even they excel, they become very rich, or they become very powerful, and they're just an awful, awful person. So if God is just how can God still be just if that person never is punished for what they've done?

Tony Chvala-Smith 18:00

Right, there's no retribution for the evil they've done.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 18:03

And so it's like, well, then it must be extended beyond this life. There must be a time when God puts these things right.

Tony Chvala-Smith 18:11

On the other side, so yeah, so Persian and some Greek thought then gave gave developing Judaism, a way to think about divine justice that it didn't have before. And of course, they assimilated the idea into parts of Judaism and made it their own. The the only place in the Hebrew Bible or that actually appears, is in the book of Daniel, which is the latest five book of the Hebrew Bibles from, you know, 165 BC. So now you've got a concept of rewards and punishments after death. And you also have this ready made image of the town dump, where it's always burning, where, where the wicked are buried, and where child sacrifices happened. It's this horrible, horrible image of a burning place. And so, in Jewish thought, about 100 years before the time of Jesus, these two, these things came together into Gahanna, right? Gahanna is the fire, the flaming place where the wicked go after death. It's not very systematically thought out, it's just simply it's just simply a term that that becomes synonymous with divine judgment. divine judgment on those who haven't lived up. So that's, that's tthe Gahanna idea. And often in the, we were checking a bunch of translations out today, pretty much most modern English translations, when they come to the term Gahannat. It's, it's in Greek, but actually, it's an Aramaic word, but when they come to it, they almost always translate it as Hell or Hell of fire. The problem of translating it that way, in my view, is that once you say the word hell, then centuries of subsequent Christian tradition on the idea of hell kind of start filling in your mental picture of what the word means, rather than, oh gosh, this was This was a good Jewish way to refer to divine judgment on the wicked, right? So it's just a it's been it's a symbol there. So that's Welcome to Gahanna, Carla.

Carla Long 20:11

Well, talking with you, as always feels like I'm in Gahanna. No, I'm just kidding.

Tony Chvala-Smith 20:17

Students have said that!

Carla Long 20:19

Weird! No, of course not. So that's a really interesting, that's a really interesting history of Hell/Gahanna. You know. So it's not like written out in scripture that says, If you do this, and this and this, then you're going to burn in hell. It's just like these ideas, that kind of gel together at some point in history. And when people think about the worst place that they can ever think of, they think about the smoldering pile of the town dump where horrible child sacrifices used to happen, which makes sense to me as well, like, I'm very visual person, I need to see it as well. So I just think it's really interesting that it just came together.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 20:56

It did, and then it's over time attracted additional ideas. And I think, you know, in popular Christianity Today, and in some, some groups who feel that they have to completely define what happens after your death, that actually, their images of Hell are probably more influenced by art and literature than they are by the Bible. And it is a few places, particularly in the Gospel of Matthew, where it says, you know, if

you don't do this, then you're you know, you're going to Gahanna you're kind of cast out of the city into, but for the most part, it's more of a symbol of a symbolic separation from God. But popular Christianity has has imbibed images of Hell it come things like from Dante's Inferno, or Scrooge, the musical, we were thinking about the there's this extra scene that's of, of Scrooge going down into the possibility of Scrooge going down into into hell. And so it's those kinds of things that often stick in people's minds. Art you mentioned...

Tony Chvala-Smith 22:20

Yeah, like, like in the Sistine Chapel, the picture of the Last Judgement. And other paintings of The Last Judgement, paint their paintings of paintings of how this stuff just off affects popular imagination. And also, then, you know, back to one of the things Charmaine mentioned, when we were starting is that uninformed and thoughtless use of Bible then draws on these images thinking that this is just what the Bible quote "says". And finds it a lovely tool for manipulating people. So the unknown after death, well, we know something about it. And if you don't do what we say to do, and believe what we say, believe there's a there's a smoldering reek in your future. You know, all of us with our sense of, of foreboding of the unknown, can fall prey to that kind of that kind of, it's, it's basically using a concept that developed over time, as a way of religiously manipulating people.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 23:25

And I think there's some other pieces to that have made it something that people hold with relish. Not ketchup, or mustard just relish, but they hold with relish. Especially those who have been harmed by someone else, and have have sensed that harm throughout their life, that there's an appeal to thinking that the one who has harmed you will suffer in like manner or more for what they've done to you. So there's, there's these human tendencies for revenge or for just sometimes we call it justice. And, and so that's appealing to people too. I mean, I've heard I can't tell you the number of people who I've heard, say, you know, of people who disagree with them on religion, even, you know, I take delight in imagining them burning in Hell. And it's like, what?! Or if your enemies of other nations, you know, or it's just, it's like, oh my goodness, how, how does that go with who Jesus is, and reaching to the marginalized and, you know, so, so there's some human tendencies that get tie into this as well. This idea for revenge and to make, and this desire for people to suffer in the same way that they have caused others to suffer.

Tony Chvala-Smith 25:03

Yeah, so so this is a place where responsible scripture interpretation becomes really, really important. And part of that responsible interpretation is learning the historical development of a concept and what it came to mean. And then recognizing that, again, the Charmaine I never tire of saying the Bible is a library, it is not a book. And as a library, it has many different voices speaking about many different things in many different ways, depending on context, the same, the same, the same collection that speaks of the fire of Gahanna, also says God is love, Has Jesus telling his disciples to love your enemies, and

pray for those who despitefully use you. It has Jesus forgiving sinners from the cross. And so we have to we have to learn to make proper distinctions in our use of the Bible, when we come to texts like this.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 26:00

And we really need to examine, who is it that we say God is? If, if we believe that God has created paths for forgiveness, for growth for change, then would God have a perpetual state in which none of those things is possible? It goes against the very nature of God as one who is seeking ways for people to come to God, that, that God is actively planning to cast out people completely from God's presence.

Tony Chvala-Smith 26:44

Yeah, I think, you know, in terms of our historical experience, we all we all know what we all know about concentration camps, death camps, mass murder, and mass torture. And it really would be helpful if we would say, is that what we imagine ultimate reality is like, when we say the word God, we're talking about that which is ultimate is that what is that what the ultimate is really like, justifying mass death and torture and destruction, and, and the inflicting of pain on on people? One could understand why I thought thoughtful person wouldn't want anything to do with that ultimate reality. But actually, that's not the ultimate reality that Christian faith at its best imagines. Right? So So I think it's, it's very important for us to be extremely cautious and very focused on who is God and what what kind of what kind of ultimate reality do we imagine? When we say the word God? And and what kind of future does that ultimate reality envision for creation? So yeah, I like what Charmaine said about the idea of, of love, forgiveness, mercy, justice, change, is there a God who who forecloses on the possibility of the change, of change, change of heart in a creature who is made in the image of God? That seems rather out of character for the God that we we imagine, is revealed in Jesus, so.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 28:19

and there's just so many directions to go at this from you know, it's like, well, people will say, Well, some people must be punished for the bad things that they have done. But then we have to say, what, what is it that we think punishment does? What does it what's its what's the outcome that we think the punishment should bring? And if if this punishment goes on eternally, then then none of the things, positive things that you might think I'm thinking of, you know, with small children, you're teaching them, you know, what not to touch. And, you know, what, where to be careful. And there may be timeouts and things like that, but it's, it's to grow, right? It's to become more aware, it's to start to control your behavior. But if punishment is not for any purpose, except punishment, as its as an eternal and what does it do? What is the purpose of it? I think there's just those kinds of questions that we would see and being talked about in restorative justice kinds of circles, that would be productive places to look as well.

Tony Chvala-Smith 29:34

So there's, there's lots of important stuff to think about with around this concept. Well, I mean, we also need to think about what is it what does it mean that God is just? What is divine justice look like? What is the relationship between divine justice and mercy? What is the relationship between justice, mercy

and love and so on? Those are important concepts. And you know, a lot of theologians who are very cautious of the idea of Hell will still say There are symbolic values to the concept still, that is the idea that somehow you can miss the point of life. Right? If the point of life is to learn to love God and love neighbor and love, self and love enemy, there are all kinds of lifestyles we can cultivate our ideologies we can cultivate, that actually, don't get us there. And so there's a there's a sense of, I forget which theologians it was, Hans Küng, the Swiss theologian Hanscom who recently died great, he wrote a great book called, "Eternal Life" back published in the 80s. I think, he says he's one who says we can we can miss the meaning of life. And we can miss, he says, this life is the emergency we have to face. I love that. We need we need to, we need to make the book The most and best and the most creative use of justice in this life. And so we can miss that we don't want to miss that. So the symbol of Hell as the symbol may remind us to take our lives, our relationships, our Earth, that good creation seriously. And not treat these as all disposable. So there's a value to it, but why there's also lots of destructive things that have happened with this concept.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 31:17

Right. And, and the value of it being a way to contrast with the kingdom of God on earth. Isn't but but if we, if we live so that we don't end up in Hell, if that's the primary focus of our life, then, then we've also not been creating the Kingdom of God would not also been living in the kingdom of God.

Carla Long 31:45

Because you're living in fear still.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 31:47

Exactly. Exactly. And unfortunately, many politicians over the eons have realized politicians and, and clergy, I would say to have realized the power of fear and how that can control people. But does, is that what God wants?

Carla Long 32:13

So I remember preaching a sermon A while ago, a long time ago, and I I was young, I was so young. And I remember saying something like, if there is a Hell than it is completely empty, and I felt completely okay to say that means Hitler is not in Hell. And there was gasps like audible gasps in the congregation. And I kind of felt like I gasped, too, because I'm like, do I really believe that? Do I believe Hitler is not in Hell, because my justice Karla long, would really want Hitler to know what he did and know how he has hurt people. And so he needs to pay for that. But that's not God's justice. That's Carla Long's justice. That's what Carla long feels should happen. And what makes Carla Long, the most comfortable. But it's still it's really, really hard to take a step back from that it's really hard to take a step back from that because I don't I feel like my views on Hell are probably pretty different than a lot of people's. But that still makes me even just my heart sounds a little bit hard to think about that.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 33:20

But you're in good company as far as your idea that that Hell is is likely empty. And that's there's some some present day writers like Rob Bell, James Mulholland, Yeah, who who would go there and Rob Bell's book is, well, Mulholland's is if if "Grace is Real"

Tony Chvala-Smith 33:47

If "Grace is True", right, and Bells is "Love Wins" writer Interesting, interesting reads on this topic,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 33:54

Both really are kind of a universalism the idea that God's deepest desire is that all people will come into relationship with God, whether in this life or and, and, or in the future life and that that's what God's greatest desire is, is to be in relationship with every person. And, you know, God doesn't, there's not this cut off time where God gets impatient and said, okay, you had your chance, you know, you're you're riding the rails, you know, your, your and down the pike. No. God's eternal nature is to, to want to draw people into relationship. But you're right. Where does all that that human sense of what justice should look like? Or do, what do we do with that? What do we do with that,

Tony Chvala-Smith 34:55

Right and that's and that's not inconsequential. Because you know, We wouldn't want to be, there are all kinds of injustice in the world that we wouldn't want to condone by just saying no, don't worry about it, you're going to be alright. Right? racism, sexism, homophobia, the destruction of the ecosystem by white people based on ignorance and malice. No, this is not all right, that we you can, you can create Hell right here right now. And so we want to be very careful not to encourage people to create Hell. On the other hand, we don't we, the God, that the God that we have come to know in bits and pieces in our journey, that the God of the beyond is not unlike that God, right. So if we, if we know God is loving, forgiving, merciful, always trying to draw us further into relationship with God, you're always helping us through our bad stuff, and helping us confront our bad stuff in change, that, that God doesn't just all of a sudden disappear, in, in whatever is beyond death, whatever is beyond experience in this creation. So that's, that's important. And there's, there are theological traditions in the Christian faith that that go in that direction. The Eastern Orthodox tradition, indebted in many ways to Origin of Alexandria, great second, early third century theologian and biblical scholar, origin of Alexandria had this idea of what he called the restoration of all things. And his idea was that, because all things have being God's ultimate desire is that all things be restored to the fullness of their being, even those things which even those things and people which strike us as really bad and evil. That through, you know, he's kind of a, an interesting thinker in Israel, but that through successive future developments, and lies and evolution, all all creatures will eventually come to fullness in God. And the Eastern Orthodox tradition, in varying ways is, has drawn on that. So Eastern Orthodox Christianity doesn't teach a lot about Hell. Western Christian traditions tend to avoid that concept and focus more on on punishment and, and, and think of justment of justice more in retributive sorts of ways, for for reasons that are historical and cultural. And so the Western Christian version has been less likely to think in those terms. But you know, theologians

like Karl Bart in the 20th century, had universalistic tendencies. Now Bart would be very careful, Bart would say, we can't speak for God on this matter, what we can do is hope. And we can, what we see is that if, if Jesus Christ was incarnate, and, and died and lived together for every person, so that every person is present in Him, then we can reasonably hope that every person will ultimately be restored to God, but we cannot declare that or dictate that. So anyway, so there's there is a tradition in Christian theology that is, is quite expansive and broad in these terms, which takes it, it still takes the reality of evil in the world very, extremely seriously. And the idea of divine justice, but it, it wants to, it wants to imagine a future based on the God we know in Jesus Christ. And not not so much, not the God, the God we wish were who could punish all of our enemies.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 38:43

But not us!

Carla Long 38:45

Never us! We're perfect, but that's actually really helpful for me to hear, and maybe for some of our listeners to hear, because, you know, like, people do horrible things. And how do we learn like you were talking about Charmaine, we need to learn how to do better and be better and things like that. And so we don't want to use fear of Hell. So that was just really helpful for me to hear, thank you so much for that.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 39:07

And the thought that those those themes have been there from pretty much the beginning of Christianity, that that God is not an angry mean, God, that's gonna, you know, if you get below a C+, you're, you're out of here or you're not going on to the next grade. I mean, it's so it's, it's good to know that that kind of thinking is not at all foreign to Christianity throughout time. God is a recycling God and doesn't throw anything out.

Tony Chvala-Smith 39:48

And Carla, if the if the final exam is a math exam, I'm just telling you, I'm not I'm not gonna make it.

Carla Long 39:55

You can cheat off me I'm fine with that.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 39:59

Then we know you're headed! Both of you.

Carla Long 40:03

Well, it's worth it, Tony and I can hang out there. So it seems like there there should there be? Should there be a more balanced way to talk about hell like not using the word fear? And not like saying you're gonna burn in hell if you do this, but is there a way to talk about it? Because Tony mentioned that there are healthy ways to talk about Hell. Well, how do we do that?

Tony Chvala-Smith 40:26

So we, we would say, let's make sure we use all four of our voices of theology, scripture experience, tradition, and reason when we're talking about this concept, likely would with any other concept related to Christian theology and faith, so and what we mean, so far, what we've been doing, we started off talking about experience and reflecting on experience. We spent a good deal of time on scripture, and trying to do what we would call basic exegesis of the term Gahanna and the term Hadees and of the development of the concept in the old into the New Testament. So that's scripture, and some tradition. Yeah, yep. Yep. And then reason we've we've touched on reason by by trying to tease out if we say x about God, what would what would it mean then to say further this, like, if we say, if we say that God is love, does it rationally make sense that God is running eternal concentration camps somewhere that's a that's the use of rational argumentation? So I'm so experienced tradition, reason, and scripture, and we've shared a little bit about tradition in terms of the the the idea of Hell and different Christian traditions, we just touched on a little bit. So a way to have balance here is to make sure we're using all of the voices of theology as we like to call on scripture experience position, the reason that helps, and then also, maybe, in terms of experience, recognizing the power of our own motivations, the negative power, our own motivations, and why we use concepts, right? What do we get out of the image of Hell or threatening people with Hell? Or teaching about Hell?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 42:14

Or fearing it ourselves? Do we think it actually creates good motivations? openness to God open to the other? What does it create? Yeah.

Tony Chvala-Smith 42:26

So we, we've probably quoted this, this this tradition before, but it's very important in Christians spiritual formation, and the idea that we become, over time, like what we worship, like what we give our attention to. And so if the image of God we give our attention to is a God, who runs death camps, and tortures people, it's pretty hard not to become that yourself, right? It's, it's pretty hard not to, it's pretty hard to become a loving, gracious, forgiving, generous person, when your image of the altar ultimate is of a God, who is, is running camp Gahanna.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 43:06

Well, and I think, you know, another place that is really important to listen to, in our time, and perhaps in all all different times, is the voices of those who are marginalized, who have been oppressed intentionally or not. Because then we begin to begin to get a sense that our culture's even our religious peoples, create Hells and, and that there are people living in, in such in such situations, where they're very, they're very being is undermined and dismissed. And, you know, the the idea of thinking of a future Hell blinds us to the realities that we may be complicit in creating Hells right now. And if, if we're only future oriented, to what's beyond death, we may be dealing death to those around us.

Tony Chvala-Smith 44:21

That's, that's a really great point, I think, Karl, think about the hell of slavery and racism in the United States, which was created and sustained by the use constantly of the Bible and of Christian language, of some Christian language. Just because you're quoting from Christian text doesn't mean that you are free from creating Hell for people. And how's it have 400 plus long years of consequences. So a positive way to talk about Hell is consequences like their consequences what we do Religious people don't ever seem to think that they have created any bad consequences for anybody else, when in fact, when in fact, history is full of the harmful consequences of poorly understood, badly interpreted religious ideas.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 45:14

Or self righteous Christians who, who dismiss others out of hand.

Tony Chvala-Smith 45:23

So in the so in the in the power of the image of a God of love, it's really appropriate for us to try to stop creating Hells, figure out the ones we have created, and right them and work very strenuously to make sure that other Hells are not created in in time and space, which is the place where Jesus declared the kingdom of God is.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 45:47

In this place.

Carla Long 45:48

That's very helpful. That's yes, thank you. Um, so I'm going to go back to what the listener asked us about when she asked about, you know, why Community of Christ doesn't talk about Hell all that often. And she's right, I don't remember talking about it too terribly much, which I kind of thought it was a good thing. But maybe it's not a good thing. Because then, like she said, your version of hell get shaped by the TV show Lucifer, where Lucifer was a very attractive man, and did not make her look terrible at all. So, I mean, so why doesn't Why haven't we talked about in Community of Christ at all?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 46:30

It's really a number of reasons. And one of them is a reaction to our old theology, we'll call it the the pre 1960 1970 theology where we had we've caught mentioned this before with the plumbers chart where you know, where everybody goes, if they're faithful, they go up this nice, narrow path. And if they're not there, go down the broadcast. But even those, that this is really interesting, because even for those who go down the road of temptation, after life, there is what's called the prison house, or the teaching place, or the pits are various names. But it's, it's another place of teaching, it's not a place of punishment. It's a place where people come to know the good news. And then there's like three or four different options. For those for people. It's not just whatever your state is, when you die, you know, you're getting graded on that, and, but is there even there, there was the sense that there were all this was a God, who made options and opportunities available after death. And so even in this in the old theology, those who ended

up in the fire, the fire and brimstone, there were very few, actually, and they would only be those who willingly denied God, after knowing God. So even even in that theology, there wasn't a lot of emphasis on Hell. And even not necessarily on Heaven, there was the glories and different levels of interaction with God. But so so even in our old theology, it wasn't a huge piece, there was still a sense of a God who makes room and who forgives and makes another path and another path and another path. But as we walked away from that older theology, where we knew all the answers, I mean, I think that was the conclusion that we got from our preaching chart. Okay, we know where everyone's going, you just do this, and you get there. And yeah, and and as we became more theologically open, as we became aware that there are other worlds than our own, and ways of thinking of God, the 60s 70s 80s that theology didn't speak anymore. And we became, I would say, rightly, humble, humbled about what we can actually say about what comes after this life. And part of that is because individuals and leaders and lots of members became more educated about scripture. So we weren't as easily led into to being told that it's all about heaven or hell, we became more informed about how little Hell is actually talked about in the New Testament, and what it is and what it is or isn't referring to. And so there's, but then there's this whole sense that we don't really know what is on the other side. But with that, at the same time, that we're letting go of the sense that we know exactly what's going to happen to everybody. There's this growing sense of understanding who this God is, and growing and trust for God, that God's desire is for good for the emergence of the kingdom of God on earth and everywhere. And so that that refocusing on what is it God is calling us to now and here in this life, that's what has to take precedent. That's what we were built on from the beginning. It's one of those threads that goes back to our beginnings that God is calling us to, to create circumstances here, where there can be heaven on earth, where there can be the kingdom of God, where there's dignity and respect for all people and creation. So that's another piece of it. And we also became more sensitive to the destructive nature of bad theologies on people's actual living and life. But I think the other thing that we would, I would say is that we began to take science and psychology a lot more seriously, and could see the importance of that in our theologies. And so when, when we began to be able to say, okay, you know, maybe someone like Hitler, maybe other people in our lives who have hurt, or, or abused ourselves or someone else, we start to look and say, oh, my goodness, they were hurt and abused. And they've been shaped into the person they are, by the culture that we're all a part of. And that this, these bad people are as much a result of the people around them, the culture around them, the governmental system, the justice system, the educational system, all of those things are shaping who people are. And so we are responsible for each other's behavior. What, how can we pick out one person and say, Oh, this is a bad and evil person, when they have been shaped by or deformed by the culture, that, that they have lived in. And, you know, we can no longer just say, Well, someone chooses to be evil or bad. We now know what what makes up people, we know the effect of trauma, and how that shuts down parts of who people are. And they can't be curious, they can't have compassion, and empathy, when they are in survival mode, and just trying to make make it through the next day. And so, we know so much more now about who people are, and to be able to think that we in any way, can determine who has more value than another. And then to think that, that God would punish people who have been harmed by their culture, that have been twisted, by the abuses that they have suffered, that God would punish them forever, when much of their life already has been a punishment?

It just becomes, in my mind words, a ridiculous way, understanding how we meet out who is bad and who is good. And quite often, it has a lot to do with who has had privilege whose way has been made, and who's been made to stumble. And, and that's cultural, that psychological, that's measurable kinds of things that we do to each other. So those kinds of realizations also help us to see the kind of the untenableness of the idea of Hell, of some people being doomed from birth, for eternal punishment for a world they have no control over. So I think those are all reasons why and Community of Christ. We haven't said much about it. Because you know, if you go back through the Basic Belief statements, that will probably give you the best idea of what we think about who God is, and what it means about what comes after this life. And the reality is, that we believe that the God who knows and loves us, forgives us and helps us to grow in this life is not different from the God on the other side of death. Because then, if it's a different God, then then it's not God. You know, it's, it's the God who who is the same, who is compassionate and caring for all people. And so that's another part of it for Community of Christ. The God that we've come to know as love, will be love. On the other side of death as well.

Tony Chvala-Smith 55:29

It would be nice to be accused of being a church, that's just way too loving. And, you know, on this on this topic of why, why we don't speak about Hell very much I recall, a number of years ago, church member in a in a place far far from where Charmaine and I sit now, who had connections with a local funeral service, funeral home. And I remember them sharing that the funeral director said, he always liked Community of Christ funeral services. Because of all the funeral services that that happened in the funeral home, these always had a sense of positivity and hope in them. That's actually a compliment, right? That's a compliment, both to our old theology, which which probably claim to know more than it should have claimed, but still was very, very generous in terms of its imagination about God and human beings in the afterlife, but also a compliment to our our evolving theology, which places Divine love, Divine justice, Divine acceptance, the Divine yearning for human beings to ever become more at the center of the center of what we have to say and talk about the center of our worship. So I'm certainly not ashamed to be part of a church that does spend every Sunday threatening people with with torture and death.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 56:58

Yeah, and I think maybe that's something one of the the answers is, is that for something that is not it's is hardly existed in the Old Testament testament and only minimally existed in the New Testament. Why would we focus much time on that at all? When the primary focus is? What do we know about God through Jesus? You know, that's, that's something to make as a primary focus, especially as we're looking at the New Testament.

Tony Chvala-Smith 57:31

So we've come a long way through hell here with you Carla!

Carla Long 57:34

I feel like I've walked through Hell with you truly, truly.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 57:38

Getting in some last little Hell's in there, before we wrap up.

Carla Long 57:42

One or two!

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 57:43

When else can we do this?

Carla Long 57:44

I'm super grateful for this walkthrough. Hell, actually, I've learned a lot. And it's, it's not a bad thing for even Community of Christ'ers, their whole lives to revisit this, because it held does seem to be a pervasive topic in our society, because it's just so juicy, you know, it just feels so good to be a make sure that, you know, people get to burn for something that they've done to us or said to us, or whatever. That feels like all is right with the world. So I'm really glad that we can kind of look at it from a different way and see you from a different viewpoint, I really appreciate that.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 58:21

And that dynamic we have to recognize is violence in our own, in our own selves, that desire to see someone else suffer. Especially if it's not at our own hands, you know, we can put we can put that on God. But we can have great satisfaction and thinking that that's what's happening, but, but it's feeding the violence within us. I think that's something we don't think about sometimes is how much those ideas are actually justifying different kinds of emotional violence in our own lives.

Carla Long 58:59

Ouch. Oooo Charmaine! You're absolutely right. I mean, I've only confessed three times on here that I'd like to see someone burn in Hell. So thanks a lot for calling me out on that! I'm just kidding. This is This is good stuff. This is stuff that we should definitely think about. Because it's much too easy to fall prey to what society is telling us that Hell is much too easy to do that. So I feel like we've come close to the end of our podcast. Was there something else you wanted to say that you didn't get a chance to say?

Tony Chvala-Smith 59:32

Um, let's see, um, great passage from the book of Romans chapter 11, where, you know, Paul, Paul in Romans is doing some of his deepest theological thinking. And it's chapter 11. I think it's verse 32. It's near the end of this long theological discussion where he says something like, God, God has consigned all persons under sin. That he may have mercy on all other words, it's a recognition of the shared complicity of the whole human race in things that are destructive and painful and hurtful. And yet, and

God has let us to be what we want to be. At the same time. God's ultimate aim, says, Paul, is that God may have mercy on Paul, not that what he did was good, but that there is mercy. I think for me, that's that's really important. That's really important to keep front and center, our theology. God's yearning, to be merciful and gracious and kind towards every creature,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:00:39

That God's goodness is the last word, not our badness.

Carla Long 1:00:43

Beautiful beautiful. Thank you so much Charmaine. Thank you so much, Tony for for sharing those thoughts with us. I really appreciate it.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:00:50

And thanks to your listener for raising these questions that are are fun to look at and and we need to be talking about.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:00:58

And one, and just one more thing. Carla, we have a Hell of a good time!

Carla Long 1:01:05

Bye, guys.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:01:06

Bye!

Josh Mangelson 1:01:13

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