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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 00:31

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

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 00:44

Hi, Carla. Always good to be with you. Good to be here today.

Tony Chvala-Smith 00:47

Hi, Carla. Good to see you.

Carla Long 00:49

Oh, it's wonderful to have you here. And, so, today is a really, all of our topics are interesting, but this one maybe might feel a little bit near and dear to some people's hearts because I personally have a lot of complicated emotions when it comes to this very topic. I have gone full circle, I feel like, when it comes to this topic. I have loved this man. I have hated this man. I've come to understand this man a little bit more. And sometimes I just, I'm not, I'm a non-violent person, but sometimes I just want to punch his, this man, because he is annoying. There are some annoying parts about this man. And now you're wondering, gentle listener, who is this man? Well, this man is Joseph Smith, Jr. Um, and I wonder if you, who are listening to this podcast, also feel some pretty complicated emotions when it comes to Joseph Smith, Jr. If you're listening to this podcast, I imagine that you have. So, we're going to try and maybe unpack some of those things that we are feeling about him and some things that we know about him and some things that maybe you don't know about him. We'll, we'll try and give you some more information about that. So, Tony and Charmaine, I feel like a good place to start might either be like, in Community of Christ, what is our traditional thinking about Joseph Smith, Jr? Where did we come from in Community of Christ? Are we supposed to love him? Are we supposed to think critically about him? What are we supposed to do when it comes to Joseph Smith, Jr?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:16

Ah, it's, that's a great, great set of questions there. And, and actually, it is, uh, encounters with, with people who are seekers or, or ex-members of the LDS church that, who have kind of raised some, some concerns with us about how Community of Christ people sometimes talk about Joseph Jr. and also about the Book of Mormon. And it, it feels, you know, even though, you know, the, the folks I'm thinking of, have really worked through a lot of stuff and, and dismantled a lot of beliefs, still, when, when they hear especially long time Community of Christ people talk about Joseph Smith, Jr., there's this, this reaction of, Uhh, you know, how, how irreverent how disrespectful. And so, so it's something we wanted to kind of explore. And so that's, I love where you're taking us. I think that's a great place to start, is, How did we originally think, or traditionally think about Joseph Jr.? And even there, it's pretty

complicated, really. So we're going to just kind of do, do the streamline version, though, and give you kind of a sense of how, how RLDS then Community of Christ have typically thought about Joseph.

Tony Chvala-Smith 03:43

This, this is a complicated relationship, Carla. So, we presume lots of people listening to this podcast know something about complicated relationships, so, so, our, our com, our relationship with Joseph Jr. is kind of like that.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 03:59

But in the traditional perspective, it was pretty straightforward. The idea was, you know, here's Joseph, he has all of these amazing experiences with God: visions, answered prayer, forgiveness, seeing in, you know, visions, seeing, seeing God. So, obviously, he must be someone special, and, 'cause God gave so many signs around him. So, that would be, you know, kind of a starting point. And then another place that RLDS people especially, so, we're thinking back to traditionally, I think, if we talk about traditionally we're talking about before the 1960s and 70s. That'll help give you some kind of a framework. So, because RLDS figured they were the one true church, obviously the things we believe must be the one true things to believe and since polygamy is wrong, and unlawful, even, so, it couldn't have come from God. And since God called Joseph, God couldn't be the author of those things. So, if those things happened during Joseph's lifetime, it might have just been the bad influences around Joseph. Right? You know, like Brigham Young. These are, I mean, these are the exact words that people would have said. And either Joseph didn't know about it, which was a handy way to look at it, or Joseph didn't approve and these other guys were doing this behind his back. So, this is a way that some of the early RLDS dealt with some of the inconsistencies maybe, that they kind of knew about, about Joseph.

Carla Long 05:49

Because when you're the one true church, everything has to be perfect. Your prophet has to be perfect. And, so, if Joseph wasn't perfect, that whole one true church thing would fall apart very, very quickly. So, Joseph had to be perfect. (Right.) All that makes a lot of sense to me now. That, I really appreciate you saying that. That helps me.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 06:06

Joseph had to be the one true prophet and beyond reproach. And that's all kind of one package. Right? Yeah. And, and then people would have said, Well, you know, Emma, and Joseph III, who was also a prophet didn't believe that Joseph instituted polygamy, and they were closer to him than we are. So, that must be true. And so it must have been somebody else's fault. So, you know, there's all of these ways that church people dealt with it. Yes, he was, he was really pretty perfect. Mostly. Because, yeah, if your identity, if the rightness of your church is based on the rightness of your founder, there's a lot to lose. Right? So, so that whole dependence on the character, so the unsavory aspects kind of had to be dealt with. But then there was this really annoying question, is that if Joseph was so favored by God, why did God let him be killed by the mob? Right? And so this became, actually this is a pretty convenient answer, a kind of a rose here because uh, RLDS theology kind of said, You know, everything was going well until Nauvoo. And then Nauvoo, all the weird stuff started happening. And so, so the obvious ques, answer to this question of, Well, why didn't God save Joseph?, is that it's because

he became a fallen prophet. So, that the things that he was promoting or involved in in Nauvoo then meant that he was no longer a prophet. And so the consequences of that were that, that he wasn't protected by God anymore. And so, that, that was all worked in there as far as the hard side, the Joseph character.

Tony Chvala-Smith 08:09

So, I have to keep repeating, this is old traditional reorganization views. So, thus far, two views: perfect, pure prophet who could do no wrong and he just, he just played with bad people who, you know, that he hung out with a bad crowd. And they, they messed things up. Or before and after, he was a perfect pure prophet up to about 1830, 1840, and then in Nauvoo, he became a fallen prophet. And, and in, in that old theology, somehow he had to be eliminated. So, so those are some traditional views.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 08:45

So in another piece, that, that kind of coalesced these views of Joseph and kind of smoothed out a lot of the, the uncomfortable pieces, was a book that was published in 1934 by Inez Smith Davis. It was called The Story of the Church and it, it provided a really, I call it a digestible, convincing and pristine picture of the founding of the church and the founder. And I'm just going to do a little quote from Mark Scherer's book related to that. Let's see if I can find it. There it is. "So, in 1934, the church published Inez Smith Davis's faith promoting The Story of the Church and continued its publication through and beyond the 1970s. The work met the needs of people who preferred knowing only inspired deeds and heroic decision makers. Such history found itself in the mainstream of interpretation in Davis's age when consensus history carried the day." And, so, that was, uh, her writing. It's a, it's what we would call apologetic theology in the church or apologetic history. And it was, really, it's a happy book to read because, you know you're right, you know that God is, is, God's hand is in all of this. And there's no hard questions.

Tony Chvala-Smith 10:19

In, in today's language, in today's political language, we'd say it's the, it's the perfect spin on Joseph Smith, Jr. and the whole, and actually the whole, it, it is actually called the story of the church for a reason. It's not it, it was always treated as history. But there's a difference between history and story, at least from the critical historians' perspective. So, yeah, so, it's, it's a lovely spin on the story and on Joseph.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 10:43

But it really promoted the whole idea of being the one true church and all of the pieces fit. So, what happens is in the 1960s, and 70s, we have what we call a historical awakening. And we're using new historical methods. And we're using them to look at our history to look at things like the Book of Mormon, and Joseph Smith, Jr., the origins of the church, the divisions in 1840s, 1840s and then the re, reorganization. So, we, we're looking, we had all these new tools, but this was hard work. This was really hard work. And, so, for members who had grown up with this complete picture of, you know, Joseph good until he falls away and then, you know, and then he's dispensable. Or all, it's all good and it can all be explained. So, the first thing that had to happen with this new approach to history is it meant actually studying other documents and testimonies in the time of Joseph Jr. in regards to him, and, and we had to actually say, Oh, my goodness, there's a lot of people saying he's involved in all

kinds of things, that we would say, Hmm, a big, Hmm. And lots of things that weren't included in Inez Smith Davis, Davis' Story of the Church. And then we, we had, as we're looking through historical documents, we had to start taking seriously that Joseph's counselors, other leaders really close to Joseph, throughout his time of leadership, are disapproving of some of the theological things he's doing, some of the, the actions he's taking, his behavior, his character. And they either left the church or were demoted and didn't have a voice in the church anymore. And so we had to struggle with that, that, that Joseph was actually muting voices that disagreed with him, or brought things to light that he didn't want brought to light. And then, the other piece that I think really was a turning point for many church members, is that we became aware, again, we looked at another part of our history, and that's the reorganizing part of the history where the reorganizers are actually debating over many of the things that had been part of that latter part of the, the church's theology in the 1840s. And, you know, things like polygamy, like gathering to a particular spot and try to create a city, of the multiplicity of gods, and baptism for the dead. And, these were, these were sometimes raging debates in the really, in the early reorganization, and when, when people who were already long time members could start to see that, you know, people like Briggs Sr., or, or Gurley or Marks, these, these reorganizers of the church, that they really had mixed feelings about Joseph, and they really wanted to avoid some of the mistakes he had made. And they really wanted to leave behind some of the theology that he had developed. That gave people permission to start to say, Okay, we, we, we must let go of this idea of a pristine prophet.

Tony Chvala-Smith 14:28

And also, it, it, it became hard to have a before and after view at this point, right? So, once you start doing critical history on Joseph Smith, Jr., and his time and period and so on, you can't just say, Well, the bad stuff started in Nauvoo and it was all good before that, because, because you have to deal with stuff like, All right, what about the thing with Fanny Alger in Kirtland, right? So, I think, I don't think Inez Smith Davis even touches that with a 10-foot pole, right? (If she knew.) If she knew, right? And so, so, um, and the, you know, the whole Egyptian papyri debacle in Kirt, that's Kirtland, right? And Kirtland had become this sort of sacred time for the reorganization. But critical history says, No, this, this is, there's not a before and after. This is a kind of a mixed, this is a mixed salad. And there's, there's, there's little bits and pieces all through it that, that maybe you don't quite like the taste of.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 15:29

And, you know, I think one of the other things is that, even as you're reading through some of those things from the 1850s, and 60s as the reorganization is coalescing, is that leaders seldom actually directly critique Joseph. And that's partly because, especially once Joseph III and Emma are part of the, kind of the leadership, in leadership roles and very prominent, you know, they're, they're, they're not wanting to point fingers at a person, but they, it's more dealing with some of the theology, some of the understandings of who God is, the nature of God, the trying to move away from a theocracy, but moving more towards a democracy within the body so the body decides, not just one person decides what God is asking of them as a group. And it's always good to remember that many of the people who joined the reorganization are the dissenters, people who, who, who were always asking the annoying questions, even before things broke apart. So, I think that's important to remember that, that that's part of the nature of, of this body.

Tony Chvala-Smith 16:44

It's, it's really interesting to read material from that era because in Nauvoo Joseph was, was everything. You know, he's, he's mayor, he's prophet, he's oracle, he's president of the university, (he's a militia leader.) And, and so, but they never, they never say we, we sure don't want to do what Joseph Smith, Jr. did. They, they, they talk about the phenomena connected to them without ever naming him. And that's they still revered his, his memory and, you know, (To some extent.) certainly, to some extent, and they just, and, you know, when, when his, his widow and his son are kind of important symbolic figures, you can't say, your dad, and your former husband was a total jerk, right? When it came to Nauvoo, they can't, they're not going to say that. So.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 17:30

But as you look into those kinds of things, you have to, to honestly acknowledge that there's not just one storyline here. That there's a lot of complexity. And that Joseph Jr. is a complex person, um, with all, all sorts of characteristics, good, bad, and ugly. So, so one of the things that we recognize, we, we need, go ahead, Carla.

Carla Long 17:55

Well, I was just thinking, you know, one of the phrases that comes to my mind every single time I think about Joseph Smith, Jr. and this is, I use this phrase a lot with seekers, I use the phrase absolute power corrupts absolutely. And, like, it's like he almost had to keep going and proving and showing that, Oh, I can translate these Egyptian papyri. Oh, I can do this. Oh, God is speaking to me. Oh, we must do this. And just kept building and building and building and he just didn't know when to stop. And people just kept, kept expecting bigger and better and more wonderful things out of him. And, like, uh, he was kind of just a simple guy from the east coast. Like, it's not like he was Harvard trained or anything like that. So, I just, I, that's actually how I can feel a little bit of sympathy for him when I think absolute power corrupts absolutely. He had absolute power like you were just saying, Tony. He was all of these things. And,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 18:50

What if this is new to someone? (Yeah.) And what are the expectations that everything that comes out of your mouth is from God? What does that do to you psychologically, emotionally?

Tony Chvala-Smith 19:04

And the people who, the people who could have or tried to push back on him, things didn't usually end well for them. And, you know, even, even Emma's in a bad situation because, good heavens, she's, she's a wife in the Victorian era. What if, if she says, I've had it. I'm done with this. What's left for her? And when a group of people in Nauvoo in 1844 said, We've totally had it and we're going to publish an expose of this. We all know what happened there. Right? So, so, yeah, his, the, the, the inability of the system he created to critique him and hold him accountable became a, a real problem. And reorganization remembered that and it took a long time for the reorganization historically to say, Yeah, and the source of the problem was actually Joseph himself.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:56

It took a long time to do that. But in the 60s and 70s, that comes, that's just right in front of people as they start looking at, at history, looking at a whole bunch of, of other documents that they've been unwilling to consider valid history up to that point. And so, Carla, what you just said, Joseph had to be humanized. He had to be allowed to be a human being. And, you know, so the growing evidence of his involvement in polygamy, theology of many gods, the, his own Masons group, sexual affairs, various unethical practices, meant that the church had to figure out how its purpose and call could not depend on the perfection of the prophet. And so that's, that raised, then, the que, the question was out there. It was out of the, the cat was out of the bag and people had to deal with, How are we going to deal with this? And, of course, some people don't. Some people say, Inez Smith Davis gave us this handy dandy book and it will help explain who we are absolutely.

Tony Chvala-Smith 21:08

Don't mess with my framework. (Whaatt?) Yeah.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 21:10

The, some people, it's, there's too many other things going on in their lives and they, they, they can't emotionally deal with that. So, that's, that's one of the things. So, the question is, How to sort through all this new information, deal, deal with these revelations. But how to stay in the church where God has become real, where there's that connection with people, this is where I belong. I mean, for lots of people who were, who were kids and older, in the 60s and 70s, when all of these things start unrav, being revealed, and sometimes unraveling, um, they had to, to make this, these decisions. And so the following, we've got a number of responses that were mostly coming from those in, who were alive in the 60s and 70s, and especially those who have been deeply influenced by this old tradi, the traditional approach to Joseph. Um, I, I want to make, I want to say that because later generations because of our unease with Joseph Jr. starting in the 60s and 70s, we didn't know what to say about him. And same with the Book of Mormon. And so we didn't say a lot for a decade or so as we tried to sort through, Well, what do we put in our, in our Sunday school materials? What do we tell kids as they're learning about the church? And maybe the focus shouldn't be so much on Joseph. Maybe the focus should be on, like, I don't know, Jesus, God, the Trinity, you know, maybe. And so that's, that's one of the shifts that happen, that's happening. But there, I would say that people born in the 80s and later may not have heard very much about Joseph or the Book of Mormon, actually. And, yeah.

Carla Long 23:04

So, I, this, recently, actually probably 10 years ago, I was at a church in Independence and they were having this children's focus moment and they had decorated the stage like grandma's attic. And they pulled out a picture of Joseph Smith, Jr. And they said, Oh, so, you know, like, Who is this guy? Whoo. And none of the kids knew him. One of them even said, Is that Jesus or John the Baptist? Like we're talking like a modern picture. And I was actually thrilled about it. I thought that that was, I mean, I'm not, I think we should know some of the history, but I don't think that we should idolize him, like you were saying, and I was, I was glad about that, but also glad that maybe they're learning about him in a, in a way that is a bit controlled and positive, you know, like that, like that.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 23:50

And even that idea that this is something from our past, grandma's attic, it's not essential to our everyday faith. It's, but it's, you know, it's part of our background. I, that's a lovely way (That's a great story.) to approach that. But yeah, exactly. And, and for some, I think, I'm thinking about young adults who we work with, for young adults who never heard any of the traditional stuff, or and some didn't have, there's, there's church materials out there, but they didn't get used in lots of congregations. They give another view of Joseph or another way of dealing with, with him as founder. When they do find out some things like that, they're often embarrassed and self-conscious, defensive, and want to make some distance. We'll say a little bit more about that. But for those I would say, who are 40, 50 and younger, that's not an uncommon situation. So, but then, so what did the people initially 60s and 70s, how did they, how did they sort? How did they figure out what it meant to stay? So, the whole idea of the fallen prophet that we talked about earlier, the fallen prophet narrative, that became really popular for those who didn't want to deal with the messiness of the history. They could just say, Oh, yeah, I've heard that. You know, basically, Joseph started doing some bad things and then he got wiped out. And, you know, that's just the consequences of him falling, having been a fallen prophet. And then people could just leave that as, as enough of the story for them, and they wouldn't have to look into any of the other stuff. But many people felt deceived by the people who had taught them the story, often forgetting that, that's the only story that the people had told them the story had. So, how could they be deceiving? But that, that created some, some tensions, especially in the 60s and 70s when there is already this defiance of authority, and this trying to create a new world that, that doesn't deal with, follow just the conventions of society. So that was one: being angry with the messenger and their inaccurate story. A, a, another was to leave, you know? Some people would say, You know, we had this tidy story, a very clean-cut good story where good people and God made good things happen. And now we're saying, Oh, my gosh, Joseph was a complicated person who messed up sometimes. And if that's what we're founded on, I don't want anything to do with it. And quite often, those folks would go to more conservative kind of absolute faith. And so that was (Exchange one absolute,) Right. (one absolute vision for another absolute vision.) Right. Feeling, so they could have that sense of being absolutely secure, that they were good with God and in the right organization. Another thing that, another way that people dealt with things, was what I call take up the sport of Joseph bashing, and within historical and theological circles in RLDS and then Community of Christ, that's become something that when people get together, that's something that they, they like to do at times is to Joseph bash. And for those folks that old saying about, knowledge is power, that also became sometimes destructive within the body where they would want to shock people, other church members, about this information that they had about Joseph to show a. that they, they knew more, but also to kind of force other people to, to be on the same path that they were on in their struggle with figuring out what to do with, with the idea of Joseph and in our history. So, so it was really necessary for individuals and the church as a whole to no longer make the reason for the existence of the church dependent on the purity of a founder.

Tony Chvala-Smith 28:37

Yes, so the there's there's the dawning awareness that the value and purpose and divine calling of the church do not depend on one's view of the, of the founder, that, and I want to be careful about founding language because in some respects, I think we need to see in the reorganization and Community of Christ that we had founders not a founder. (Yes.) Right. So, but, but you know, Joseph Smith, Jr. is kind of the archetypal start of things. But there's this, this growing awareness that hey, our, our sense of who we are, and where we're going, and what we're becoming, is not really dependent, ultimately, on

whatever Joseph did or said, whatever his, you know, whatever mistakes he made or whatever good things he did, right? So, that's, that's a really important, that, that's a kind of that's, that's that point in, like the the life cycle when the young adults says, Hey, I am my own person. I no longer depend on Carla and Kuzma. That will happen someday to you, Carla.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 29:39

So, so there's the, you know, being angry, feeling deceived. There's leaving, there's taking up Joseph bashing. But then there's also this process of humanizing who Joseph is. Recognizing that he is a lot like us. That he sees some things clearly and some things not. That he was influenced, as you say, by this growing power and ability to, to cordon off power for himself, and the ongoing expectations of him to be oracle and, and the connection with God, the, the voice, the leader, the one giving direction. And so there was an empathy, was another way that people could start to deal with Joseph Jr., is to see him as a flawed human being just like the rest of us. And to, to not hold him to the kinds of standards that we once did. So, that was a, another way of dealing with it. And fortunately, I would say, that at that same time that we're discovering these things, those in the 60s and 70s, there's new opportunities to refocus our deepest instincts to change the world. In the past, we talked about building Zion, but in the 60s and 70s, all these new arenas in the world are asking us to come and to, to share our message. And so we have, instead of looking inwards and saying, Oh, my gosh, what are we going to do about this problem? we're being invited to look outward. And, and in that whole process, we recognize that Jesus, God, the Spirit, that's what we have to share. Not our, not the story of our history. And so, and that that's a trustworthy kind of message to have. In fact, it's deeply, deeply in our roots as a movement; the idea of, and look at, look at our sacraments, in Community of Christ, they're all rooted in God's love for us, God's desire to bless, in Christ's actions for, with people in his lifetime. So, it's like, Oh, my gosh. So, we kind of, in some ways, started developing a, a more articulated Christology, embracing the idea of Trinity, that had always been implicitly in our theology, but that we hadn't really articulated very well, in many ways.

Tony Chvala-Smith 32:31

So this, this process that's going on is really important because what's happening is, there is a, a de, a detangling, or disentangling of Joseph from the gospel, right? Until this point, if you, if you ask a reorganite, you know, What's, what's the gospel about? It was about Jesus and Joseph. Right? And so what's happening now is that the, the church in the 70s, especially then beyond, saying, No, no wait, no, no. Joseph is not an intrinsic part of the gospel. The gospel is about Jesus who reveals God by the Holy Spirit and calls us to the work of sharing, building, proclaiming the kingdom of God. That's the gospel. And, you know, that, that pulling Joseph out of the gospel story was very painful for lots of people. But hey, that goes all the way back to 1844 when William Law, William Law, one of his critiques of what was happening in Nauvoo is that Joseph had made himself and the prophetic office intrinsic to the message of the church, and it, it basically took over 100 years for us to dethatch, right? to dethatch the lawn and, and say, No, the gospel is not about Joseph. The gospel, the gospel is about the Divine Word becoming flesh in Jesus Christ and transforming the world by the Holy Spirit.

Carla Long 34:04

And I could be wrong about this, because I'm not an expert in different denominations in the restoration, but I would say we're one of the few who has actually done that. I don't know of any other, just, again, I

don't know a ton, but I don't know if anybody else has. And that's the hard work. That was, thank goodness for those people in the 70s for helping us have a much clearer picture of what the gospel is and having us focus in on the gospel rather than the gospel and Joseph.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 34:31

Yeah, and, and it meant letting go of that most precious and central, for many people, idea that we were the one true church and which was, I would say, the biggest blessing that we could have had at that point is, and, and all the questions about Joseph helped us loosen our, our grasp on that and say, Wait a minute. Maybe, maybe God is enough. Maybe Christ's gospel and message and presence is enough. And that opened the ecumenical doors as well so we could begin to appreciate, acknowledge and appreciate where God was at work in the world. And so this is also time when our term for Zion, or idea of Zion, had to retire for a little while, go into, move into the background. And the idea of Kingdom of God or the peaceable Kingdom or the kindom had to have room to grow. And the idea of, that we even though we're small, we can make a difference in the world, by, by how we, how we interacted, how we tried to live out Christ's message.

Tony Chvala-Smith 35:39

And, and we should say, his, historically this work actually got started in the 1960s. And we've commented on that in other podcasts before, but, but it was in the 60s, when that, this awareness that as we're trying to spread into other parts of the world, we, we had this profound mix up about what the gospel was, and we needed to, I mean, that that sorting process started going on earlier. But you know, it's in the 70s and 80s, when it's really beginning to come into fruition and ultimately, it yields what is today Community of Christ.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 36:10

And it's, it's a really crucial moment too, the 60s and 70s, because alongside the questioning of our using these critical historical methods to look at our history and Joseph Jr., it's also, there's this growing openness to the culture around us and the developments in that culture. And so, you know, there's a recognition of equality of women, there's speaking and acting for peace, and for justice in the world that's happening in all kinds of ways, with civil rights movements, but also with, with youth movements and marches and, and bringing attention to corruption of power in the United States anyhow. And, and so that's all blended together and it, it really opens up the doors for the RLDS church, eventually Community of Christ, so that, that then there's this sense that we can, we don't have to be against what's happening in society, the the developments that make room for more love, for more justice, more equality, for a more recognition of those who've been marginalized. It, it becomes a natural. And, and it becomes then part of, Oh, these are ways that the kingdom of God can be on, on the earth. But it also ties to our original instincts that we can help to create these spaces where God's goodness, God's love has room to grow. And so that, again, helps us lessen the importance of those things, like Joseph, like our one true, like the fact that we have books that nobody else has. It lets those things take, I would say, a proper place in our identity and theology. So, and it freed us up, I mean, becoming aware that our legitimacy as a church was not dependent on the character of a founder or founders, but on God's work in our midst helped us to embrace other parts of our story and gave us a new and deeper respect for fellow Christians. And we started creating partnerships. So, it's all this looking outward, now, instead of looking inward that bloomed out of this. And along with that, the sense that we're not just like every,

everybody else, all other churches. We have a unique call, but it's not a call that's separate from other denominations' call for, to do God's work in the world. It's connected. It's connected to the bigger Christian message.

Tony Chvala-Smith 38:57

So that, that coming to value who you are now and who you're becoming independently of where you came from, that's really important. It's an important step. It's, it's important in personal life, too. And yet, there's, yet you, you, you have to say, be able to say this is where we came from, but where we came from does not determine who we are and where we're going. Right? And I, I can share a little family story about that. I'm not sure if I've shared it before, but, but so, Carla, one of my great-grandfathers was, was a Christmas tree salesman in Michigan. And guess what? He never owned any land that had Christmas trees on it. And, as far as we know, he never bought Christmas trees wholesale from any Christmas tree farmers. Where did he get these Christmas trees that he sold every year in November and December? Ah! My great-grandfather Bergy was a Christmas tree thief. (Off of public land.) Yes, he's, he, he apparently, he apparently, in November, found Christmas trees and cut them down and put them on a lot he had in his, on his home in, in Michigan. But I think it's, I think it's a fun story, but I'm here to tell you I'm different from Grandpa Bergy. So, who, who I am, though I have Bergy genes in me, does not depend, does not depend on what Grandpa, Great-grandpa Bergy did, where he got his Christmas trees. And, oh, by, and by the way, he's, he, he, he drank whiskey and smoked filterless Chesterfields even as he was dying of emphysema, and, and I don't do that. So.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 40:41

So we are not tied to all of our ancestors?

Tony Chvala-Smith 40:45

We are, we are, we are, are, we, we come from a place. We're not utterly, finally dependent on the place. Right? We can become something else. Thank God we came from someplace, but we are not completely determined by the someplace we came from.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 41:04

So this, we wanted to give that background to kind of give people who are encountering Community of Christ today, kind of a sense of where we've been, and why it's been necessary for us to, to dismantle, to re-examine how we look at parts of our history, as well as Joseph Smith, Jr. And there's a really wide range of reactions within Community of Christ. So, some are theological. Some of those reactions are theological. And, and we, and so we need to ask questions like, How did Joseph Jr. draw on foundational Christian beliefs? Or not? You know, and that, that helps us to sort through which of the things that he had, that he offered and had to say, we, are still, still valuable to us. And when he departed from those foundational Christian beliefs, why, and where did he go instead? And, you know, this is just a simple question that we need to keep asking as we're trying to figure out what to, to do with this figure. And then, another one that we always do with our theology classes is, How did the four voices of theology, tradition, scripture, reason and experience, how did they figure into Joseph's emerging theologies? Because he had more than one, and they changed fairly frequently. And so that's another way to start judging which of the things are relevant and useful and valuable, and which are really a product of his time, and can be left behind. And I think that's, that's been part of this process is,

we don't have to carry all of that. What is relevant, what is useful? So, some see Joseph Jr., as the founding prophet. Again, so, we still have people who are kind of in denial of the historical details and some see him who was, as a founding prophet who was illegitimately charged with polygamy while others were the cause. Umm. And, uh, another reaction was more ethical or moral. Some people would say, Well, he was a fraud, you know, he was just out and out somebody who, who made stuff up and, um, could, could, could draw on his charisma enough that he could lead people anywhere. Uh, s, some say he was a fraud, a well meaning despot, um, where things just got out of control, or he was a seeker of power and wealth. And you can, there's evidence you could use for that. Some would say he was a lech, well, there was some evidence for that, or that he was confused about where he ended and where God began, you know? And so, and so I think there's, there's all of that. Some hold on to the ideal Joseph who did not intentionally do anything wrong, but got a bit carried away, or surrounded bad, by bad influences, which we mentioned earlier. Some, and I would say there's a large portion of the church who are at peace with the idea that he was human, with flaws, with unhealthy desires and an unrealistic sense of himself. But also, he had a desire to respond to God's call as he perceived it. And so it's kind of bringing that balance. Yes, there are these flaws, but there was also this, this desire to respond to God. Because he is human, his motivations are mixed. Um, in some things he, some things he succeeded some he failed. Others were just really bad ideas. Um, to, to start putting this into kind of a human context, the question then becomes, Can God make something good from the flawed attempts of human beings, and particularly this human being. And so these, this is kind of one of those theological, ongoing conversations within people and among people in the church. And then, as I mentioned earlier, some people are embarrassed by Joseph and simply want him and the Book of Mormon to be written out of our history. And sometimes that's younger generations who haven't had options on how to see Joseph. Or, it's, they're surprised by our history. Um, and so, you know, that's, there's a, there's sometimes a tendency to reject something, um, with, this is, I guess, another step, is another response is, there's a tendency to reject something with the same fervor that you once embraced it. And so, for those who really took in the whole story and then found out these things, there's a tendency to, to reject it with that same kind of fervor. For many, um, our identity as a, as individuals and as a, and the purpose of the church has actually been distanced from Joseph for quite a long time. It's been kind of this growing chasm. And, and so the, the prominence of who Jesus is and God's call to us has comfortably taken that space of our reverence and our purpose. And I think that's where lots of people have come to, is that, Okay. Yeah, that was, uh, that was a long time ago, or my obsession with Joseph, I'm seeing that it's not really that relevant to today. So, let's, let's go with what is relevant.

Tony Chvala-Smith 47:04

So, there's all these different kinds of responses to, you know, Joseph, in the church. And, and I think it's, there's an interesting analogy that we can make with other denominations here. For, for example, you know, thoughtful Lutherans have a complicated relationship with Martin Luther. I mean, I, in some respects, Mart, in my view of Martin Luther is one of the most brilliant Western theologians in the lineup. But he also said anti-Jewish things that fed into that horrible tradition of anti-semitism in Europe. And when the peasants in Germany revolt, and the German states revolted, because they just couldn't take it anymore, Luther didn't back them. So, he's got a mixed legacy, too. And so thoughtful Lutherans today have to deal with that legacy. People in the Calvinist traditions, they have to deal with aspects of John Calvin's theocratic tendencies. And, you know, our, our Catholic friends, they, they

have various Pope's from their long history that don't quite stack up to a John the 23rd or a, a Pope Francis. They are quite the opposite. So, we're not the only ones who have to, we're not the only ones you have to struggle with what to do with our founder or a leader in our movement. And this is always, you know, the theologian would say, That's be, that's because the founder, or the leader, or the initiator of a movement, is not the substance of the movement and you have to look elsewhere for that. And then the question becomes, To what degree does the movement, you know, lift up, hold up the centrality of Christ as God's revelation to the world, that kind of thing, right? So, so yeah, so we have to do the same kind of work. We're, we're not, we're not, I should say, we're not alone in having to do this sort of critical sifting work in trying to make sure that, that we don't let our, our one of our founders, and the first, you know, in our case, the first, what, 14 years of our founding story, overshadow who we are, or dominate who we are, or try to block who we can become. Very, very important that we keep doing this sort of critical work.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 49:29

And that's where I would go, too, is just to say, This is really important that we keep talking about this, because, you know, as I indicated, there's, there's a couple of generations that don't have much background in how, how to talk about how the church began. And so, people that, we've seen this fairly often with young adults, who, whose connection to the church is their grandparents and their grandparents are still reading Inez Smith Davis. And so they're introduced to the church's story, this perfected story, and they don't understand that where we are right now is really quite different because they haven't seen that evolutionary process of the last 50 years. And so there's this desire to embrace our hist, meaning, you know, embracing our history means believing what, what their grandparents believe without any recognition that there's a lot that's happened and lots of nuances and really a different kind of focus. But for people who are encountering Community of Christ, it, it will be helpful for them to know that there will be views of Joseph Smith, Jr. and this relates also with the Book of Mormon, I think, there'll be views that are very nu, nuanced and developed. They've, they've taken in the information and they're able to recognize that these, these people, or these scriptures, are part of the human process and that we don't have to see them as perfect in order for them to have been or to presently be useful by God for, for our bigger understanding. Um, but there's many who will feel embarrassed about these parts and, and people who are embarrassed re, react in different ways; some as denial that that's an, im, important at all. We don't want to know anything about that or denial that there was any problems. Either way. Um, and, uh, it's, so there's that's embarrassment, denial, distancing, ditching, you know, just let's toss it out completely. All of these are, are common approaches. But just to know that there's, there's many ways that, that, um, you can approach these questions and wherever you are, in your own emotional or theological development, there are probably people around you who have struggled with these issues, too, in Community of Christ, and that the conversation needs to keep going. So, so ask people how they're, how they've dealt with that, or what their own story of changing views on, on Joseph have meant. That might be a way to approach it.

Tony Chvala-Smith 52:33

So, you know, at this point, someone might listen to us might say, Well, gosh, what does it mean then that Joseph was a prophet? (Hmm.) Right? And so, uh, this is a place where we have to, we have to let what the term prophet meant in Joseph's time kind of shape the conversation, not what our idealized mental picture of a prophet is, right? Because if someone says, Uh, I, a prophet, a prophet must be an

infallible spokesperson for God. Well, that's not what prophets were in Joseph's time. Actually, it's not what they were in biblical times. But that's a story for another time. But for example, there, Joseph is not the only prophetic figure on the American frontier. Right? And, by the way, in 1837, at Farwest, umm, in the Elders Journal, there's this section in the Elders Journal where Joseph's doing a little Q&A, right, commonly asked questions by outsiders, and Joseph's giving answers to them. And one of the questions is to, to this movement he started, Do you believe Joseph Smith, Jr, to be a prophet? Joseph's answer? Yes. And every other person who has the testimony of Jesus. That needs to sink in. In other words, he, he's, he's de-elevating what it means to be a prophet there. Being a prophet is at that moment is a shared, a shared experience of what it is to be a follower of Jesus. I think that's pretty important. And then also, in his context, there are other prophetic figures, right? Here's one you may never have heard of, Carla. This is a guy named Isaac Bullard. Isaac Bullard and the Vermont pilgrims. This is backing up to before 1820. But no, I said Vermont, right? And Isaac Bullard is this prophetic figure and he's got a, a community that forms around him. They're restorationists in the sense they believe that they're restoring primitive biblical religion. The guys wear bear skins. The people are filthy. They don't wash. And everything, and, and Isaac Bullard governs them by revelation. And they are, they're passing through Vermont on their way out west. They finally, they think of the West as the promised land. This is like 18, almost 1820, so, so they eventually disappear. They, they, they're on their way to Arkansas territory and they eventually disappear. Right? But what's similar here, right? A person who's governing a group of people by oracles and revelation. So, there's also this revivalist named Joseph Thomas who died in 1835. He was called the white pilgrim. And this revivalist, part of his call experience to be revivalist, as he has a, he has a dream in which Isaiah, the prophet Isaiah appears to him and kind of, you know, calls him to, to the work of evangelizing. And, so, we have a revivalist who a prophet, the dead prophet spoke to in a dream. And then there's mother Ann Lee of the Shakers, who, who is, in, in essence, you know, she sees Christ in a vision, she forms a sort of prophetic community around her and actually, they, they, they begin to think of her as like a second incarnation of Christ. This is Christ's second coming. He's come in the form of Ann Lee. But, um, in other words, in Joseph's context, prophets, there are lots of prophets. And, so, yeah, Joseph's a prophet in those senses. And so we have to be careful not to elevate, elevate, you know, start with a kind of idealized view of what a prophet is, is a, is Joseph a prophet or not? It's like, Well, in his context in the 1820s, and 30s, there are lots of figures who are doing similar kinds of things. And he's a prophet in that sense. And whether he is (. . .) doesn't, doesn't impact who we are today, directly, in the sense that we, we, we have, we have transformed and grown since then. We are not dependent on, our value as a community does not depend on what Joseph was, what he did, what he messed up on, what he said. We have inherited some amazing tools from him, but we get to use them in our own way. And he doesn't get to control the discourse anymore.

Carla Long 56:56

Well, this has all been very, very helpful, very helpful for me, because I have, as everyone knows, probably I work with a lot of seekers. And I get the question about Joseph Smith, Jr. all the time, all the time. And, so, now I know what podcast to point them to if they want more information after my very sad, little conversation that I have with them. Because there are times when I don't know whether to let my emotional response come through with seekers, or just say, you know what, here's the, here's the argument and for and against. It's really hard, really hard to separate those things out. So, this has been really helpful for me. I appreciate it.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 57:35

Yeah. I think one of the things that's been most helpful is that it's, it's a win win. So, as we started looking historically at Joseph Jr., um, we also then had to, to look at the, the humaneness of the organization that we're a part of and I think that's the win win is that we don't have to pretend that he or we are perfect, that, or that we've arrived yet. That, that we're all part of this, this ongoing progress, this ongoing sense of trying to respond to God's call in the world in our time. And yes, we're, we have those gifts like Tony talked about that have, that, from the past, um, but God's, God's needs, God's calls in this time may actually call creative energy from us in creating some new ways of embodying the church, embodying Christ's message, embodying the kingdom of God. And we don't have to carry a lot of luggage in order to do that.

Carla Long 58:52

I appreciate that very much. I also know that you two are good enough friends of mine that if I ever start following someone where I'm wearing a bear skin and not washing, you'll let me know that this is probably the wrong way to go.

Tony Chvala-Smith 59:04

We, we, we will let you know, Carla. And we also will be there to remind you: make su, make sure your bag fits in the overhead compartment. If there's too much baggage from our past and that doesn't fit, we're going to, it's going to have to be checked through.

Carla Long 59:20

You're very good friends for helping me through that. I appreciate it very much. And thank you so much for this conversation. I really appreciated it. It's been really, really great for me.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 59:29

Thank you. (Thanks, Carla.) We're always glad to be able to kind of dig in and pursue some of these lines of thought and things that, that people might be struggling with or want to talk about.

Josh Mangelson 59:48

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