

**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 00:33**

Hello, everyone, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla Long, and today i, you're listening to Percolating on Faith. It's a series where we talk about, you know, something really technical that we like to call theological stuff. So, this theological stuff is, um, being presented to us by Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith. Hello, Tony. Hello, Charmaine.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 00:55**

Hi, Carla. Good to be with you.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 00:57**

Hi, Carla. And you know that we are nearly always neck deep in theological stuff, so, we're, we're happy to share about it with you.

**Carla Long 01:05**

Oh, man. And you know, one of my favorite activities is watching you dig out of those, that theological stuff. It's really fun to watch. Uh, and today, we're gonna' be talking about, um, this, like, big tent, slash umbrella analogy that, you know, that we, a lot of people think that Community of Christ is like super wishy-washy. That we, you know, it's like where anything goes. That, like, we can do whatever we want and believe whatever we want and we can still be a part of Community of Christ like it's no big deal. And, so, I use the term wishy-washy, because actually, here in Salt Lake City, I have heard us being called wishy-washy, and I'm like, No, no, no, no, no. And sometimes I have a really good answer for that. And sometimes my, I don't have a really great answer for that. Sometimes my answer for that is a little bit wishy-washy. So, I'm really excited to listen to what you have to say because I know that we aren't, but I may, I don't know exactly why we aren't. So, um, yeah, let's talk a little bit about this. Like, maybe the best first question would be, What is this idea that I'm trying ineloquently to talk about? And where does it come from?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:14**

(Sure.) So, actually, this idea of the, the big tent, or we might talk about the, the wide umbrella, uh, we use both of these analogies. One of them comes from actually the, the beginnings of our movement at, in what was The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, now Community of Christ, um, and just the realities that they had to deal with. And it really set a tone, I think, for the rest of our, our identity and how we deal with diversity view, of views within our midst. But also, and this is the other side of what you're saying is, what is crucial, what is core to who we are, what we believe, and, and how it is that we hear God's call to us. So, Tony, if you want to just start a little bit with the history part?

**Tony Chvala-Smith 03:10**

Yeah, sure. Um, so, when Joseph Smith III becomes leader of the church in 1860, what he's coming into, what's called, what's called the new organization, and it was a kind of ragtag and motley group of dissenters. And the one thing they had in common, they had actually two things in common. No Brigham Young and no polygamy. Maybe the third thing they had in common was Joseph Smith Jr. indicated that his son, Joseph III would one day be the leader of the church. So, it took a long time and Joseph III finally did step up to leadership of the church, but he inherits a church that is, has got people who have come from different factions (Right.) of the, of the then splintered, early restoration movement.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 03:57**

So, after Joseph Smith, Jr., dies, the church goes in lots of different directions. And there's all kinds of experiments on parts of the themes of that earliest church. And, you know, so there's some people who are coming together in the 1850s, so, this is before Joseph Smith III becomes the president of this motley group, as Tony said, and some of them have, have tried out some of these other fractional groups. And, they, they thought, Oh, this sounds like the original story. And then they found out that, Oh, well, this group was, was practicing polygamy or they've made their, their president a king, or, you know, so there's people who are disaffected by trying to find the right faction of the church to be a part of and, so, they, on the one hand, are desperate to, to hang on to some of their original beliefs, but also terribly disappointed and not very trusting. Um, and there are people who, you know, who may, may have been some who still said, Well, polygamy might be a possibility. But there were some, as Tony said, that were definitely against it. There were some who thought that, that Joseph, Jr., the founder of the church, was amazing. And everything he did was right. And there are others who are like, Oh, no, you know, he made some fatal turns, here, and here and here. Um, you've got people who, um, believe in baptism for the dead, those who are unsure, and those who are dead against it. Oh, so, sorry, I was not intended to be a pun, but it does kind of work. Uh, so, you've got this really wide variety of people who've had all kinds of different experiences in the original movement and then as they're trying to coalesce again, as a group. And Joseph Smith III, very wise and gentle person, um, tried to find a way to give room for these many people who are looking for, for a way to be community, for ways to connect with God, but also for ways to not hurt each other in the process. So.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 06:29**

It's kind of fragile, right? It's a fragile group. And, and, so, he inherits a church that already has a diversity of views. And, so, the question that then emerges between 1860 and 1880 is, Alright, if we have a diversity of views, do we have a center, do we have a center idea. And, so, um, by the time you get to 1879, there's controversy in the Reorganization about how much of the Doctrine and Covenants do you have to take as actual doctrine? Or, How much do you have to take it literally? How, how much of Joseph's various theological, uh, experimentations do we carry on with us? And there were a number of people in the church like Jason Briggs and Zenas Gurley, Jr., who are like, We, we've got to trim a whole bunch of stuff out, right? And so what we need is essentially some sort of creedal statement that will get us onto a center point. O, on the other hand, you had people with deep, long experience in the church who, who, who still believe, for example, in a literal gathering to Zion, Briggs was totally opposed to that, but believed in a little gathering, or literal gathering to Zion, and, you know, some who, who believe that the Prophet was literally a mouthpiece for God. And, and, so, what, what happened

was Briggs and Gurley kind of brought this all to a head in the 1870s and 18, 8, late 1870s, into the early 1880s. And, so, resolution, there are some general conference resolutions, one is, is I think it's 219, in which the church in conference says, Here's our standard books, Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants. Those are our standards. But that didn't solve the problem. And, and some of these guys knew this, this did not solve the problem of what parts of it are standard, right? Because the Bible, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants said all kinds of stuff, especially the Doctrine and Covenants, says all kinds of stuff that we don't think we really actually want to practice. And, so, um, in the General Conference of September 1879, a resolution called Standard of Authority was passed. And this is a, a really, in my view, it's a very brilliant piece of, kind of mediation or mediating theology. And basically, what it says is, Yes, we have three standard books, Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants. First thing is stuff in the Doctrine and Covenants, you know, believing particular affirmations and stuff in the Doctrine and Covenants is not a test of membership. In other words, you can disagree, you can dissent from some of the, I guess I'll call it the weirder stuff in the, in the Doctrine and Covenants. That's not a test of fellowship in the church. And, uh, belonging to the church does not require you to believe in everything that's called a revelation of Joseph Smith, right? So, that was part of the mediation. So, that, this resolution makes, this is kind of, I think it's kind of remarkable statement, says, uh, you know, have any standards it's not intended, and quoting now, It is not intended or indeed practicable to bind or proscribe the liberty of conscience, whereby violence is done to the honesty and integrity of the people, right? So, there's part of it. We don't want to, we don't want to, uh, we don't, as Chramne put it, uh, we don't want to have thought police in the church, right? And we're not going to do thought police stuff. And you, you have your own personal integrity that you're responsible to. There's part of it. The rest of the sentences, by, by proscribing dogmas and tenets other than the plain provisions of the gospel, as affirmed in New Testament, Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and set forth in the Epitome of Faith. So, in other words, there is a central, a central theme to the church, what's called the plain provisions of the gospel. And then there's other stuff that is not, that's kind of open for discussion. And so the, this resolution was trying to say, we do have a center, but we have a lot of free space out around the center. So, in a sense, that's kind of the origin of, of the idea of the church being a big tent or a big umbrella. And, uh, I, I'm, I'm sort of surprised that people call that wishy-washy. There's this, there's a, a clear center to the church's theology and its message and identity still to this day. And, yet, there's a lot of space, a lot of space for people to get, you know, as close to that center as they want to, to move from that center if they need to. Um, so, that's, that's what I mean, that's kind of the historical background of this.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 11:28**

But I think to be fair, one of the things to recognize is that wishy-washy is always, um, understood in contrast to something else. And if we look at our history, as in the church, we'll see that, theologically speaking from just after that time, the 1879, 80s, there is, there does develop a kind of consistent theology that then for the next 80 years, is normative for the church and becomes a, a uniformity of belief. And there's this expectation that you will believe the story of how this church came to be, or you'll believe the story of who Joseph Smith was or wasn't in a certain way. And, so, then there is this long period, where there is an expectation that we all think alike, and that we believe in the same kinds of things. And, and much of the church did, and so, so where we are today, in contrast, to, say, where we were in 1960, um, is quite large. And where we were in 1960 is a sense that, Yes, we all kind of know who we are, and, and we've had this 80 years of, of reinforcement of a certain set of understandings of

who we are and what the gospel is and, um, what God wants us to be about. And then that undoing that happens in the 60s and 70s is expanding of who we are, as a church happens. And then for many church members, um, and, and this goes through to today, for many church members who grew up with that sense that there is a definite set of beliefs that determine whether or not you're a good and that, you know, in their beginning times, RLDS church, today Community of Christ, that if you don't hold those somehow you're not faithful. I mean, (Uh huh. Yeah.), it's not uncommon for, you know, in the last 40 years or so, for people to hear somebody in a leadership role or world church leadership role, say something that didn't fit with that old theology and for people to be shocked and appalled and how can they think that if they're a member of this church? Um, because and, and so during this last 40 to 50 years, there's been, um, a much broader exploration of theology, and, again, going back to those roots of acknowledging and making room for the diversity of beliefs, of theology, um, of understandings of God and the purpose of the church. So, it's the contrast (Yeah.) that sometimes has to, that draws us in.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 14:38**

And I want to add one other thing historically, Carla, and that is that this, the sense of the church as having kind of a center, but an o, open ended contours, that's not unique to Community of Christ. And if I think my way back to the 1830s, oh, there was another denomination forming that was trying to do that. That was the Campbellites. And, lo and behold, Sidney Rigdon came into the, the, the early Latter Day Saint movement out of the Campbellite movement. Um, not many years ago, Charmaine and I went to a wedding in a Disciples of Christ church here in Independence. As we were waiting for things to get started, there were pamphlets in the pew in front of us and I started reading one of their pamphlets about their, their faith and beliefs. And I thought I was reading, reading a pamphlet that could have been written by Community of Christ. In other words, it said things like, We have, we have, we have central convictions and values and principles. We believe strongly and focus on Jesus Christ. But we leave lots of room for exploration around that. And I thought, Well, isn't that interesting? If we're cousins with anybody, we're cousins with the Disciples of Christ and that part of the Campbellite movement. So, there's even deeper historical roots than the 1870s for this kind of identity marker of us. So, that's a little bit of background. Uh, sometimes, people say, you say, you hear a lot, Community of Christ is a non-creedal church. And there's a certain truth to that we don't recite creeds in worship.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 16:14**

And we don't require people to assent to a creed in order to be accepted.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 16:22**

Yeah, right. Right. It's ( . . . ) you can, you can be a member without, like, signing on to different

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 16:27**

There's no obligation that you have to believe everything in that particular creed.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 16:31**

But, but the problem with the statement is that the word creed comes from the Latin word for belief, to believe. And I think sometimes it's interpreted way too loosely as you are a treat, a church without beliefs, which is a total oxymoron. You can't be a church without beliefs because then you would

believe one thing, we believe in nothing. And so it's a logical impossibility. But what we, I think, what we've tried, what we've meant, in the past, when we've said, we're non-creedal, is it's more accurate to say, No, we're non-dogmatic and non-coercive. Uh, we are guided by central values and principles and certain beliefs, uh, and by sacraments, and so on, but, um, we're, we're not going to be, uh, we're not going to do violence to people with those. So, that's a, a different take on what it means to be non-creedal. By the way, our translators in Spanish and French sometimes have a heck of a time translating that word, non-creedal, because when they try to translate it into those languages, sometimes it, it comes out as non-believing. And it's not what's intended, of course, but it, it, it sometimes is actually taken that way by, uh, even English speakers. So.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 17:46**

So, I think one of the things to understand about Community of Christ and our core beliefs is that we have, we, our core beliefs are kind of like a framework. What are the things that we as an institution understand as the nature of God, the nature of Christ, uh, how the Holy Spirit is at work, um, what our relationship to the rest of creation should be? Uh, what is the nature of sin or salvation or, you know, any variety of kinds of things. So, we do have a framework that, that goes to the core of what the church is shaped by, what our sense of call as a church is shaped by. And, and it's there, it's you can see it quite clearly, actually, in our documents that are, again, institutional documents that, that try to state what it is we believe about God and our purpose. And some of the places that you can go to look for those would be, um, if you're looking at the website, the enduring principles. The enduring principles are not the same as basic beliefs. But we also have basic beliefs, that are basic beliefs that are short statements about different elements of theology, um, and how the church approaches those. Enduring principles are descriptions of, of our relationship with God. What does our, what's, what's the, we often say, what is the, the thumbprint of God on this denomination? Um, and, so, things like grace and generosity are one of those enduring principles. The recognition of God's great gift of grace given through Christ and experienced by the Holy Spirit. And then growing from that is the call for us to be generous to the world. Um, sacredness of creation, I'm just reading a couple of the enduring principles, that, um, God is at work in all of creation and cares about all of creation. And we are called to, to relate to creation in that way as well. Continuing revelation, that God is constantly speaking. So, these, worth of all persons, all of these are ways that we have as a, as a movement, as a denomination have been shaped by our understanding, our experience with God. So, those, the enduring principles, um, one thing that might be helpful to listeners is to know that these were come up, were, we came, these were created, that's a better way to go, these were created by, uh, consensus. A group of leaders from all around the world coming together and trying to articulate and, and give authority, I guess you'd say, to statements that describe who we are. And, so, they, there was this, this process that they as a group determined which of these things that described who we are, were most important and how will we describe that in ways that will be useful to, to help existing members and those who are seeking to know what we're about in our relationship with God, with the world, with each other. So, the enduring principles are not dictates from on high, but have been kind of, have emerged out of the life of the church. So, that, that's some, a way to think about. Um, so there's the enduring principles, there are basic beliefs, there are a couple of statements, um, and, that might be helpful. One on how do we see scripture, which is Scripture in Community of Christ, (Yeah.) and then one about Christ, so So, these are statements that will help you get at what is the core understandings, theological understandings about Community of Christ. And I think you'll find that, though they are very varied, I mean, there's lots

of room for lots of different expressions within them, They are quite concrete. They're saying some very definite things about who Christ is, about who the Spirit is, about God's work, uh, in the world, and our sense of call. So, there's some very definite things there. But there's also room within it, in those too, um, for invitation for people to explore, and to ask questions and to be in different places.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 22:05**

It's titled, We Proclaim Jesus Christ. It's a, it's a, a Christology statement is what we sometimes refer to it as. Yeah, and so I, I think, um, what's really important is to understand that Community of Christ is an international body that's in, you know, multiple cultures. And we have, we have two, two, uh, tasks. They're like, think of them as the two poles of an ellipse. On one end of, of the ellipse is we have to be able to uphold aspects of a universally recognizable Community of Christ identity as a Christian church. On the other end of, uh, the other pole is making plenty of room for personal integrity and freedom, personal responsibility, and for the, the vast diversity of individual personal journeys. So, those two things, uh, I don't see them as, as in some kind of conflict, they can be, but they're not, they don't have to be. But rather, it's a, kind of a creative tension that they, that they form in the church. So, we have to have certain statements and, and affirmations and, and, and guidance that is public, ( . . . ) our public theology. And then there has to be lots and lots of cushion, cushion room and, and space to maneuver and grow and explore on the other side of that. So, both things work together in Community of Christ.

**Carla Long 24:19**

So, my gosh, this is awesome. Um, there's, I have two things to say. And, um, one of them is that just recently, we were doing an adult baptism class in the Salt Lake Congregation and, um, somebody was in there, and they, they were listening and there's this chapter in the book Of Water and Spirit on Jesus Christ and they had a difficult time with that chapter. And they had just come out of a different church denomination, and for them, they have to, they feel like they have to agree with every single thing that we say in order to be part of Community of Christ. And, you know, like, we've had conversations with them said, that's not actually true. And she said, Well, how can we, how can I be a part of Community of Christ if I completely cannot get on board with what you even think about Jesus Christ. And I wa, I was kind of at a loss with words. So, I'm really appreciative of what you're saying here. And I, and I really hope that this person listens to this podcast about this.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 25:27**

Good. I mean, that's exactly the kind of situation that church leaders and those of us who are working in theological areas, are, are, we're sensitive to and we really want to communicate the kind of breadth of room there is for people. And, so, again, going back to Joseph Smith III, his, his image that he used was the big tent, is that if people want to be in the tent, then there's room for them, um, no matter how close or far from the core beliefs of the church as they are, and that they, and, and the reality is, is that people move throughout their life, uh, further away and closer to, um, any organization's core beliefs. And that's part of the growth process. Tony and I use the image of, when we're, especially when we're talking about Jesus Christ, we often use the image of an umbrella. And, and so this is a really good one if we can go, be really specific about one, um, one set of beliefs and how they're actually articulated quite clearly within the church. But with the proviso that it's not required that everyone think like this in order to be a member of the church. So, we're just going to look at that statement that we talked about earlier, the We Proclaim Jesus Christ, which, um, came out around 2006. I want to just read the



preamble for you. "Throughout history, Christians have sought to describe their faith in Jesus Christ. Traditionally, churches have used statements of belief and confession of faith, to articulate their understandings of Jesus Christ's person and work. Such statements provide important foundations for educating disciples and for addressing theological questions that arise from time to time." So already, just a little aside here, already there's room made for the reality that we're going to have questions and that that's part of our process of doing theology in the church is that we recognize that questions are important. So the next part, I'll continue, "While words are never ultimately adequate, the statement that follows describes what is at the core of our beliefs as the Community of Christ. We do not expect that there will be universal assent to this statement and we reject any prescriptive use of it. Yet, it is our prayer that the church will find this to be a compelling summary of our faith and that it will be helpful to the mission of the church as it proclaims Jesus Christ and promotes communities of joy, hope, love and peace." So, there's that balance within it the same as an organization, there are some things about who Jesus is that we want to proclaim, and that we want to make available as people are encountering Jesus that, that these can be some entry points into that relationship. But we don't assume that everyone's going to agree with this, or this, that this is, um, we don't assume that any, that you have to assent to it in order to feel like you're an, um, a full member of the church. It's a place to do exploration individually and together. And then, if we were to read through the whole statement, you would find, um, a lot of different approaches to who Jesus is. And you'll find a, a variety of the, you'll, you find some answers to the variety of, of debates and arguments have, that have gone on about Jesus over time. It's, we're not stating in that statement, you know, all the, all the theological debates of who Jesus is, but you'll see that there's a, a lot of nuance, a lot of dimensions to who Jesus is.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 29:42

Yeah, and, you know, I, I think along with that, um, going back to the umbrella, uh, (Oh, yes.) big, big, big, big, big, big, big, big, big giant umbrella. Something holds the umbrella up. So there's a center, a centerpiece to the umbrella. Um,

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 29:59

It's structurally (Right.) essential to the, that the handle is where all the little spokes come out from that, that hold the cloth.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 30:11

Right. And, and Community of Christ has experienced and said again and again and again, at that center is the figure Jesus of Nazareth. And, so, that's the center of the umbrella. And you are invited to get as close to that as you possibly can or wherever you can.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 30:30

You can, you can be farther out, you can be closer to it, but you're welcome under the umbrella. And I think that's the, the, the invitation always, that there isn't just one way of being under the umbrella.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 30:48

There's a great scene at the end of Matthew's Gospel. Everybody, you know, refers to as the Great Commission scene. And there's a little, little detail in that scene I love that's easily overlooked. And the, the text says, uh, so, the risen Jesus appeared, appeared to the 11 on the mountain, uh, and when,

when they saw him, some worshiped Him, and some doubted. depends on how you tran, translate the Greek so you, you can, some have rendered it, They worshipped him and they doubted. And, so, what's interesting in the Great Commission scene at the end of Matthew's Gospel is that Jesus doesn't, uh, doesn't tell the doubters to get lost. He commissions all of them. And, uh, those, those who weren't, just weren't sure about this, and Jesus says, Go into all the world, help people follow me, etc, etc. So, there's, there's plenty, plenty of space and, uh, that's kind of one of the geniuses of Community of Christ. We make lots of space for people.

**Carla Long 31:53**

I love that. I am, I love how you describe that. And what a good idea. I, I actually did not show this person the Christology statement. So, uh, I mean, if, yeah, so maybe showing them the Christology statement is, is a way to go. The other thing that came to mind when you were talking, um, earlier was about the enduring principles. So, seekers that come to the Salt Lake Congregation love the enduring principles. They love them. They, the enduring principles, um, our core values that are values that we hold dear. But I think that the enduring principles is one thing and one reason why people think we're wishy-washy, actually, because they're not rules, right? They're values. And, so, the way I see responsible choices could be completely different than the way somebody else sees responsible choices. And, so, because we're not acting in exactly the same way in those values, well, it looks like we're wishy-washy. It looks like it is a, Do whatever you want to church, it's like, Hey, I'm doing the responsible thing. Hey, I'm honoring the sacredness of creation. And, so, I think that's one, that's a major reason why those, that term wishy-washy comes up.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 33:05**

I think you're completely right. And here we come back to, uh, these two different ways of approaching organized religion. And, uh, many people have the idea of religion or Christianity as being law based. You know, there's this list of things that you should and shouldn't do. And that's how you determine whether or not you're good with God. And our church, as well as a number of others, have really moved to being principle based. So, what are the principles of living an honest and full life with God that will be beneficial to us? And what are, the principles are more like guides and, and a little bit like guardrails on, on a road to keep you from going completely off track, but the, and to help you invest in this relationship with God and not just assent or disagree with somebody else's list of what it takes to be right with God. And, so, um, it starts in a different place. It starts in a place that assumes that God already loves us. (Um hmm.) And the principles are ways of responding to that. And, so, you don't have to do everything right in order for God to love you or accept you or to bless you or to be with you. God already loves you and out of God's goodness, out of God's graciousness, these principles are ways of trying to live fully in this life with God. And different people are going to have different interpretations because their circumstances are different. But the, those guardrails can help us, um, maybe we'll wiggle a lot, maybe we'll swerve back and forth quite a bit on that road. But it's, it's our swerving. It's not somebody else's judgment determining whether or not our path is acceptable or not. So, that's one way to, to see the difference that, and people may not even, maybe even never heard that distinction between the law based and a principle based approach to a relationship with God. But it changes everything. It's a whole different approach.



**Tony Chvala-Smith 35:40**

You know, Carla, when I hear you say that about people seeing our enduring principles and thinking they're wishy-washy, a couple things come to mind. A few of them are repeatable, but, but just, I'm just gonna, let me go here first. The, the great 20th century theologian Paul Tillich made this remarkable statement. He said, The gospel is always the symbol of a gift, before it is the symbol of a demand. That's, to me, just an absolutely brilliant statement. And here's the thing, uh, if people look at enduring principles and say this is just a bunch of wishy-washy nonsense, another way to go with this is to, to realize that reading them that way, shows you just how far so much of what passes for Christianity in American culture has departed from gospel into some kind of cultural-based works righteousness, all about laws and rules. That has nothing to do with the gospel. That's one thing I'd say. Second thing I would say is, look at the principles. Grace and Generosity. We are affirming that God is gracious-- central Christian claim. Sacredness of Creation. Oh, creation is not there for our exploitation of it. That's a pretty strong claim. Continuing Revelation. This God continues to speak, reveal and guide. It's an affirmation about God and a people who are willing to keep listening. Worth of All Persons. Well, in our tradition that's scriptural. That comes from I think, Doctrine and Covenants 17. Joseph Smith said that, The worth of souls is great in the sight of your Lord and Redeemer because he suffered death in the flesh for everybody. Ah. All are Called. That's also from our scripture. That's, uh, Doctrine and Covenants 119. All are called according to the gifts of God to them. Right? So, it's about divine action in our lives. Responsible Choices. Well, you know what, the churches that live by rules, uh, may have to cover up all the times that their members break the rules because (Or their leaders.) or their leaders, because, because a rules-based approach to the Christian faith is, is, is always bound to fail. Unity in Diversity. Well, that's as old as First Corinthians Chapter 12. And Blessings of Community. Well, uh, we're saying that being church, being community is a source of blessing to ourselves and the world. It's also about God. And it's also about the importance of being together. So, there's a whole bunch in there, it's, I think, not wishy-washy. It's very, very, uh, specific. There are beliefs behind it. Right? Uh, I like to sometimes think of the enduring principles as the flesh on the skeleton of basic beliefs. And, so, um, I don't see, see them as wishy-washy at all. And I don't see us as wishy-washy at all. I think, I think we, we are a church that's trying to practice generosity and openness. At the same time, we affirm central convictions about God, Christ and the Holy Spirit.

**Carla Long 38:47**

Man, I think we hit a nerve with Tony. That sounds good.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 38:51**

Actually, that's funny. I just wrote him this, a little note that said, You're sounding defensive.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 38:58**

I second the motion. I am defensive.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 39:00**

Well, I, maybe part of the reason is that this has been hard work for us as a church, especially in the last three decades of, of intentionally moving from rule-based or law-based to principle-based approach to, um, to our relationship with God individually and as an organization. And that's, that has, and it's still ongoing. You know, there's, um, there's some people who, who really, really loved how we used to be

where if you believe this one list of particular things about who God was and what the church was and what the purpose of the church was, then you were good to go. And you just had to maintain those beliefs and you were great. And, and this is a lot more work, um, of, of thinking through. It comes back to us individually. How, how do I recognize God's generosity and God's grace? How can I, from my particular circumstances, respond, um, in, in gracious ways or with generosity to the world. And that's more work than saying, Okay, you just give a set amount every month and then you're good with God. Um, so, it's a different kind of approach. And it really does take investment on the part of individuals, but also on the community to, uh, be constantly discerning, Are we living up to these principles? Where have we had a blind spot where we may say the worth of all persons, but we've totally ignored a whole group of people, um, because maybe in our culture, that group of people is already ostracized or been judged? And where have we fed into that? (Um hmm.) And so the enduring principles are this ongoing questioning of our hearts and our minds and our actions. And that's uncomfortable. And so another reason why principles are a harder way to go, um, but I would say a much more rewarding way, too, because they call us to let our whole lives be engaged in this relationship with God, with following Christ, with giving room for the Spirit. So, the next time someone calls us wishy-washy about the enduring principles, I'm literally going to start my next sentence with the words, Listen here. And then I'm going to, then I'm going to give it to him, Tony, just like you did. Just like you did.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 41:48

Good. Or maybe, maybe you can make that stuff I just said, let, make a little Tony doll and just push play on it.

**Carla Long** 41:56

You want me to make a voodoo doll? I will. That sounds like a great idea. Um, so, that was really helpful for me to, to kind of hear that and be able to work through those things because I know we aren't wishy-washy. I know that. But sometimes it's really hard to articulate it in the moment. Um, so that was, that's really helpful. Um, so, I kind of want to go back maybe, to in my, I don't know if it's the umbrella analogy or not, but I want to talk about a little bit more about the balance. You know, about people, you know, where we used to be where everybody believed the same thing to, you know, some people thinking now that we can believe whatever we want to be, or believe. How can we find a balance in all of that? And how can I help people find a balance in all of that?

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 42:47

That's a, that's a very good question. Very relevant question, too.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 42:50

I think always a good place to begin is why principles rather than rules, you know, we've kind of talked about that. I think, too, um, another place to go is to point to those things that help us be community. Things like the sacraments. They give some structure for those people who are wanting structure. And within our church, though, we, we understand that people understand the sacraments in different ways. We have some uniformity on how they are performed, the words that go along with them, the symbols, and, um, the symbols and the words that help them be, be a sacrament. And, so, they, they are not things that are just to be done in a certain way, but they have a message as well about who we are and how we're connected with God and how we're connected to the bigger Christian movement. So, for

those who are wanting structure, helping them, helping people to see that we do have some structures that we, um, that we encourage to be done in a uniform way. So, with, I mean, just looking at the sacraments, you've got both things. There's room for different understandings of it, different individual appropriation for what it means or how it connects us to God. But then there's also the uniformity and the structure that it gives to our life in the church. So, you've got both of those pieces there.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 44:32**

So, yeah, and, and I'm thinking, too, um, another place to go with this is, um, keep, keeping, working at keeping things in their proper place. And if I look back at that resolution from 1879, it had some, I think, relevant wisdom for us there. Back then, basically the, the, the, uh, resolution said, Alright, if you, if you're publicly representing the church, and then it used the word elders then, but we could just translate it into those who publicly represent the church, um, you, you, you shouldn't, you shouldn't use either your position or, for example, the pulpit as a place to air your personal gripes and your, your individual, your individual personal beliefs. Right? In other words, you're, you are representing the community. Um, it's not that those are bad or wrong, it's that there's a time and a place for that. And, so, back then, the, the resolution said, We don't think it's a good practice for the Elders to stand up behind the pulpit and then begin to, uh, decry all of the things that are wrong with the church. Um, let me put it this way, uh, keeping things in their place means worship is about God and not about us. And, so, in, in this, worship is a place for the church to publicly affirm its faith in a living, active, loving, generous, communicating God. And there are other settings where it's quite appropriate to have the sorts of conversations we're having right now. (Um hmm.) And, so, you know, uh, context is everything. Context is everything in theology and in church life, too. So, so, uh, there's, there's a, there's a place in the balancing act, there's a place for public affirmation of what's central to our identity. And then there's another place for where we can, uh, push off against that or argue with that or argue with each other in a gentle and loving way.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 46:24**

Or to raise our doubts and our questions and honestly look at them that way. I, I think along with that, and it's kind of implied, though, just be a little bit more, uh, overt about it is that, um, while there's lots of room in the church for people to believe, uh, different kinds of things, that when people take on the role of priesthood, that there, there is a, they are agreeing to uphold the primary focus that, that core of beliefs about the church, to not undermine it for others, especially like in the, the offering of the sacraments that, you know, these are ways in which church members have come to, to connect with God. And that as ministers, our role is to help create those, those settings where that can happen for people, the people that we are called to serve. And, so, to, to use our, our public places of authority, whether that's the pulpit or teaching or, um, other places, to undermine (Um hmm.) the basic ideas and, um, goals and beliefs of the church would be inappropriate. But there isn't any sense you have to be in lockstep with everything the church believes just because you're ordained. Lots of ordained people in the church have very different views from each other and some quite different views from the, the institution and the statements that we've been talking about. But part of the role, again, the biggest part of the role of priesthood, is to serve others and to help create those settings in which they can encounter God. And to, and so part of their role in those positions is to not undermine that for other people. Some, that may be, help a little bit, too.

**Carla Long 48:24**

That actually helps a lot because, you know, a lot of priesthood in my congregation, they have very high integrity and they want to preach from the pulpit things that they believe and they don't want to say anything that is against what they personally find, um, that is right for them. And, so, uh, that's actually brings up a really a story that I think works well here. We were having a preaching class in, um, the Salt Lake Congregation not so long ago, a couple of years ago, and, um, uh, one of the priesthood members raised their hands and said, Well, what if, you know, in the lectionary scripture that we're supposed to preach on that Sunday, what if it's, it's talking about something we absolutely cannot get behind and we cannot say it because it would just ruin our personal integrity? What happens then? Do, what do we do from the pulpit? Do we lie? Do we only say what we think? Do we go with what the Church says? And I was listening incredibly closely because I didn't know the answer to this. I didn't know what we, they should do. And, so, the teacher very calmly said, Preach on something else. (Right.) And I'm, uh, that's genius. Of course, you just preach on something else. You get an, another one of the lectionary scriptures and you preach on something else. Um, you don't have to sacrifice your own personal integrity, but you also cannot go, um, against what the church is saying from the pulpit. And I think that, and while that can be hard for people to understand, I actually think that it, it makes a lot of sense for me, at least, at least I have something I can say.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 50:05**

It's a, it's a great example of, yeah, no one's asking anyone to, to, um, to lose their integrity or to undermine their own sense of honesty. But on the other hand, um, what, what are the things that they believe in deeply that will help point people to God's loving presence? (Mm hmm.) Go with that. Go with the things that will benefit. Uh, go with the good news. That's a question we often ask each other or ourselves when we are, uh, near, near the end of preparing a sermon. And it's, the question is, Where is the good news in here and here, meaning, the good news of Jesus Christ, of God's love present in the world. And, and that helps so much to, to put it all back in perspective and help us keep on track. And that might be, um, you know, an a, an addition to that answer of preach on something else. Don't, uh, don't feel that, that the church is asking you to, uh, pretend, to, to, um, to jeopardize your own sense of integrity and honesty.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 51:25**

There's a, this great image in the Gospel of John where John the Baptist with his disciples points at Jesus, and says, He must increase, and I must decrease. And I think that's always a good rule for preaching and for ministry in the church. What, whatever else, whatever else we're feeling, doing or thinking, uh, the, the point is to point and not to ourselves. The point is to point to Christ and the divine love he embodies, the care for creation he, he came to teach, and for the, the kingdom of God which is God's reign of justice and mercy and peace that he embodies and came to proclaim. We can always point to that. There's always ways to point to that and, and, and not to our own particular whatever we're, whatever we're doubting, or struggling with at that moment. Hey, I, I doubt and struggle with things, um, and many times I'm doing that as I have to preach or give ministry. But it's, it's just very important for me not, not to point to that. That's, that's my inner stuff, right? So.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 52:33

Kind of like, point to the, point to the gifts, not to the deficits, that are already in your life, um, through God.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 52:43

Yeah, exactly. And some of us may also be, a little piece of wisdom, some of us may always, may have been told by a, one parent or the other at some point in our lives, You don't always have to say everything that has just come to mind.

**Carla Long** 52:59

I know for a fact my parents have both said that to me.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 53:04

Really?

**Carla Long** 53:10

Yes, indeed.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 53:11

So, Carla, that's our big tent. We have, we have a lovely big tent.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 53:15

Big tent or a big umbrella.

**Carla Long** 53:17

Yeah, and, I mean, this has actually been incredibly helpful for me to hear and to be reminded of, you know, a lot of the things you said, we've talked about in classes with, that we've had together, and so on and so forth. But it's a really good reminder to me that we are not, as everyone says we are in Salt Lake City, and, and I will tell you that there are many people in the greater Salt Lake City in Utah area, who have opinions about Community of Christ and who are not afraid to voice those opinions. And I've heard many of them. So, it's really good to hear these, these things, because we do, uh, because we don't have, our membership doesn't all look the same and our churches don't all look the same all over the world. Um, it, it does, from an outsider's point of view, perhaps, look like an anything goes. And we are certainly not that way.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 54:16

Right. Right. The fact, I'm, I'm looking out our window right now as Charmaine and I sit at our dining room table talking to you and when the wind blows just right I see our Harmony Pride flag. And, so, uh, we believe in justice. We believe in, in, justice, especially for those who've been marginalized in a culture. And, so, that's a, that's a strong belief that's deeply rooted in our Community of Christ faith. So, we do believe in stuff very strongly.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 54:42

And it's tied to, very strongly to our belief in Jesus and the example he set, who it was he reached out to, and what it means to, to make room for Christ's kingdom in, in this world in, in our time.

**Carla Long** 55:00

Well, thank you so much, you two. And Tony, I will get to work immediately on my little Tony voodoo doll that starts with the words, Listen here. While you talk about the enduring principles. I actually can't wait just to pull that out of my pocket every once in a while.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 55:17

I, I will buy one from you when you make it, Carla.

**Carla Long** 55:19

Um, sold. It, I'm sure it's gonna be really, really well done. All right, you two. Thank you so much for everything. Thank you so much for chatting with us. I always appreciate it.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 55:31

Thank you, Carla.

**Josh Mangelson** 55:35

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