

445 | Percolating on Faith | Racism and the Moral Logic of the Incarnation

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 00:33

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. However, there's no Charmaine today which makes us very sad, right, Tony? (It makes us very sad. Yes.) Uh, because Tony is going to talk about a paper that he has written for the National Council of Churches and he's going to describe that for us which is very important, a very important paper, especially for the month of January. So, first of all, hello, Tony, thanks for being here.

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:04

Hi, Carla. It's, it's nice to be here. Uh, ha, it's nice for half of us to be here.

Carla Long 01:09

I know. We miss Charmaine so much. But we'll do our best to still be fun and lively and wonderful without her, although it's gonna be hard. So, Tony, first of all, before you even talk about what this paper is about, and what it's called, and all that stuff, can you tell us who you wrote the paper for and maybe give us a little bit about that group in case people don't know what it is?

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:32

Sure, happy to do that. So, Community of Christ is an official member of the National Council of Churches which is an ecumenical organization in the United States, uh, that's been in existence since around, oh, 1950 or so. And Community of Christ is one of dozens of member churches. We officially became a member of National Council of Churches right around 2010, 2011. And, uh, one of the things that the National Council of Churches said about us as we were becoming members is Community of Christ is an example of why the Ecumenical Movement still matters. Because they were quite aware of, of how we had been, uh, interacting with and engaging with and learning from the wider Christian tradition since the early 1960s. And how that, uh, how that interchange and, uh, cross pol, cross pollination, if you will, how that had helped transform us, uh, into, into Community of Christ. So, that's, that's where this all began. And, uh, National Council of Churches has sub-bodies within it. And one of them is called the Faith and Order Convening Table. And that's one that I represent Community of Christ on. For the last couple of years, the National Council of Churches has been focusing a lot of its effort on racism, the problem of racism. And, uh, I and Zach Harmon-McLaughlin, uh, the Dean of Community of Christ Seminary, and, uh, some of our seminary students were, were part of a, a gathering in 2019 in Virginia that, uh, was, that, that went to the place where the first slave ship landed. It was a really powerful experience, you know, on the 400th anniversary of the first enslaved Africans being brought here, uh, brought to the United, what would become the United States. So, um, we've been focusing a lot of work on race, racism, and in the, in the Faith and Order Table, they're different, they're further subgroups, and one of the subgroups that I'm on is been trying to work through the idea

raised by Jim Wallace a few years ago that racism is America's original sin. So, that's what we've been focusing on. And in that subgroup, several of us volunteered to do some writing. And, so, I, I wrote a paper for the, for the Faith and Order Convening table, and subsequently for National Council of Churches, titled Racism and the Moral Logic of the Incarnation. So, that's, that's how this all got started, Carla.

Carla Long 01:46

Oh, my gosh, Tony. I bet that was a powerful experience to stand there with people and, and try and be in that moment and be in that place where the first, um, slave ship landed. That's, that is, that brings me to tears.

Tony Chvala-Smith 04:30

Yes, it really, it really, it really was, um, and to think that for 400 years, people, white people who usually self identified as Christian of some kind, continued to support aid, abet, uh, explicitly or implicitly, slavery and enslavement and subsequently racism and Jim Crow in the United States. It, it's, it, it really makes you pause and wonder and feel a deep sense of shame, um, and it makes you, it does make you wonder why, why in this religion could one ever imagine justifying something like enslavement? I mean, how, how did that ever happen? And why was that ever sustained? And why did, why was never, you know, adequately critiqued like centuries ago. So, that's a complicated historical social question. But still, you, you stand there and you think, uh, Those first enslaved Africans were brought 400 years ago, this is, you know, I'm talking about 2019 now. And we still live in a country where black people are not often safe when police, when police around. How do we, how do we make sense of that, right? And how do we not just make sense of it, but how do we confront it? How, how should churches confront that and deal with it and deal with their own internal experiences of aiding and abetting racism? So, that's, that, you're right, Carla, it was a really difficult and powerful experience to be there.

Carla Long 06:14

Well, um, Tony, I'm really interested in what, uh, what you wrote. Um, can we talk a little bit about your paper and, um, some, yeah, whatever conclusions you drew, and all that?

Tony Chvala-Smith 06:27

Sure. I mean, in some ways, it's it's very simple to sum up what the paper's about. And the way I could, I can do it fast is to say that this is true of Community of Christ. It's true, the ecumenical Christian tradition, that at the very heart of our shared Christian faith, is the doctrine of and belief in the incarnation of the Divine Logos in Jesus Christ. That is, to put it as Paul puts it in II Corinthians, In Christ, God was reconciling the world. Or to put it as the Gospel of John puts it, In the beginning, was the word, the Logos, and the Word was with God, and the Word was divine, and the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us. And then, John 1:18 refers to, to the, this, the Incarnate Word as the only begotten God. In other words, right at the heart of the, the Christian story and the Christian faith is the conviction that in Jesus of Nazareth we're dealing not only with a first century Palestinian Jew, but we're dealing with God incarnate as well. The, the incarnate, if we choose Trinitarian language, the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity. So, what does that all mean? What is, what my paper is about, what are the moral implications of making that claim? And, to put it very simply, if the incarnation

is the Archimedean, the Archimedean point, right, the, the pivot on which Christian ethics ought to be based, then how could a religion that held that one, this one person represents all people everywhere, that the incarnation is a, an event of universal important significance and that, that God the Word was, in the words of Chalcedon was inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably united with human, humanity in Jesus Christ? How, how could a religion that believes that ever rank people or ever say, There's a higher and a lower humanity and the lower humanity can be enslaved, used, bought, traded, and sold because the Bible says so. How, how do you, how do you get there, right? Um, and so what I'm trying to do in this paper is say that, that across the centuries, this is Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, all, all, you know, all Christian communions have had, uh, a moral lapse when it's come to racism and have not, we've, we've simply failed to, to follow the moral logic of our cent, of our central conviction, right? Uh, it's, it's easy, it's easy at Christmas time to sing all the hymns about, you know, you know, you know, the, now, now in flesh, a word of the Father now, now in flesh appearing, and, you know, infant, Holy Infant lowly to sing about God come down and all, we, we love to sing about that during Advent. And yet, presumably, I don't think it's even presumably, actually people sang that stuff in the southern United States in the 1820s and 30s. And then, and then brutally treated enslaved people. And even after the American Civil War, then found, found ways to keep African Americans enslaved, uh, in structures, economic, political, social structures that made sure that there was there was a tiered human reality, those above and those below. Um, in other words, there's been a, a major moral failing in the Christian faith when it comes to, to racism. And the moral failing is based on not taking our own central doctrine seriously.

Tony Chvala-Smith 10:34

It's so easy and, I mean, I think in our, in our personal lives, Carla, we always know that there, there's the things we believe in, then there's the things we do, and there's always kind of a, I mean, we can all confess very freely that there's often a disjunction between those, right? That's true. But this one thing, this is a maj, this is a major disjunction when it comes to how a religion has treated other people. And I should say, I'm not only talking about it's not, it's not just the enslavement of Africans. Think about how Jews were treated in Europe by Christians. And we can find other places in the world where, uh, where Christian groups may treat some kind, some, some minority differently or less than. So, we do not, we do not live out the logic of our central conviction that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Godself and that in Christ, all humanity is fully, completely represented. There's no, there aren't, there aren't two or three incarnations. There's one incarnation which indicates the unity of humanity, um, before God. And so I think, you know, that's, that's kind of what this paper is about. And, you know, I, I, I process through that and, and a return to the classic, classic doctrine of the incarnation as it's expressed in the Chalcedonian definition which I'm sure, Carla, you remember word for word from History of Christian Thought 1.

Carla Long 12:06

I recite it every night before I go to sleep.

Tony Chvala-Smith 12:10

So, yes, the years 451 and this is, this, this Ecumenical Council meets in Chalcedon to deal with a variety of Christological issues. And the Chalcedonian definition upholds what's called a two natures Christology, that Christ, that, that in Jesus Christ, we have one who is fully divine and fully human and

that, that the divine and the human are not, they're not the same, but they're not separable either in Jesus Christ. And, so, uh, that document is sort of the bedrock document for, for Christian theology and particularly for Christology. I, I should point out, too, that, while Community of Christ does not officially use the Chalcedonian definition, our own Christology statement, which is titled We Proclaim Jesus Christ, does use some Chalcedonian language in it. So, for example, uh, the second paragraph of our Christology statement, um, Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh, both fully human and fully divine. In Him, we see ourselves and we see God whom he tenderly called Abba, the Compassionate One who gave birth to all creation and declared it to be very good. Together with the Holy Spirit, they are one. In other words, we're, we're making a Trinitarian affirmation. Um, we then also say further in our Christology statement, paragraph three, quote, By the mystery of the incarnation, Jesus born of Mary came into the world to live and dwell among us to reveal God's nature and will. Uh, He prophetically condemned injustice in the temple and proclaim the good news of the coming reign of God on earth, preaching liberation to the oppressed, and repentance to oppressors. He taught his followers to love God to love their neighbors and to love their enemies. By eating with sinners, serving the poor, healing the unclean, blessing children and welcoming women and men as equals among his disciples, Jesus declared that all persons are of worth in the sight of God. That's an end quote there. So, Community of Christ ha, has strong statements about the unity of all humanity, even in its diversity, in Jesus Christ, and yet, and yet we, too, we, we, too, share in the legacy of white supremacy and racism in the United States and other places. So, um, I think there's a certain trisinth to Jim Wallace's claim that racism is America's original sin. In the paper, though, I say, one of the things I say is that, that yeah, that's good, but where does it come from? And I start the paper off by referring to a really troubling novel written by Joseph Conrad in 1902. It's called Heart of Darkness. And it's about a riverboat, a, a, a guy who's a riverboat captain in the free Congo as the Congo is being, you know, utterly exploited and subdivided by European colonialist powers. And there's this scene in Heart of Darkness where the riverboat captain, his name is Marlow, Charlie Marlow, he's, he's steering this little river boat up river and, uh, he, he's, you know, he's, he's the, the fictive character who's the narrator of the story. And he notices, you know, Congolese tribes people on the shore of riverbank, or on the riverbank, and there's this line in the book where he says, where Charlie Marlow says, The men were no, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it, the suspicion of there not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. End of quote. In other words, in this environment, where Africans have already been exploited and, you know, for centuries by this point, this is early 1900s, but this, this European riverboat captain's like, Well, darn, they, they seem human. What am I supposed to do with that? And it's this, it's this little revelation that he has that, Oh, my gosh, they and I are one. What am I doing here? What am I, what am I, what are we doing to these people? Um, which colonialists have not often thought enough, really. Um, but, but so what I, what I try to argue in the paper is that racism is also based on original fear, right? It's proper to call it an original sin, but it's also based on original fear, the fear, the fear that after all, Carla, we are, we are actually one, right?

Tony Chvala-Smith 16:41

And if we are actually one, then any attempt to exploit, to dehumanize, to sub humanize other people, is a grave, grave sin. It's, it's a sin against the image of God. And as I argue, in the paper, it's a sin against our pri, our primary conviction of the Incarnation. So, that's, so, so, I talked about original fear, the fear of otherness and the fear that the other, whoever the other is, might actually be just like me. So, so, I think that's, to me, that's a really important thing that happens in that novel and it, it helps, it

helps flesh out a little bit, that we're in what, what racism is based on, though it's always complicated, but gosh, the, the fear that the other is not actually all that other, but actually just like me, what happens to me then? Am I no longer special? Am I no longer above, right? It, it kind of, it kind of flushes out all kinds of, uh, working assumptions that the Augustinian in me connects to original sin and the problem of the, the false love of self.

Carla Long 17:54

Well, I would say, and, and I don't know if you agree or not, but I would say it's that fear that drives us to do a lot of things that we do, and, and almost every single time if we're driven by fear, or maybe even I should be so bold to say every single time we're driven by fear, that is the antithesis of what God would have us do right? When that fear takes ahold of us and we say, and we do things just because we're scared of doing something else, then that is definitely not what God would want. And, so, I, I mean, I think that that's a really good point that you're making. And, you know, like, when you say things like original sin, you know, like, it doesn't really, it kind of just bounces off of me. Original sin, you know, like, whatever, I can handle all that. But when you say fear, that's something that I know personally and that's something that I understand in a very deep part of who I am. And that changes, um, how I see it rather than original sin, you know? I, I think that, that we can really just relate more to saying fear.

Tony Chvala-Smith 18:52

Yeah, and there, there's a theological component to that, right? So, you know, in the, in the New Testament, one can argue that, that the, the, the opposite of love is not hate, the opposite of love is fear, right? And so, for example, in the first letter of John, um, perfect love casts out fear. And I do argue in the paper, that, that the church, and here I mean the ecumenical church that includes Community of Christ, we, we don't, we don't do enough practicing and teaching about how to let the doctrine of the Incarnation which is about divine love becoming enfleshed in Jesus of Nazareth, how to let the, our faith in the Incarnation, uh, you know, re, remove our layers of fear, right? Fear, fear of the other, fear of failure, fear, fear of success, feel, fear of whatever. We, we are all crippled by different kinds of fears. And those fears lead us either to powerlessness or they can sometimes lead us to aggressive or assertiveness that, uh, seeks the harm of others. Um, so, what if, what if we learn to let the doctrine of the Incarnation, Christ incarnate, uh, heal us of fear?

Carla Long 20:14

I think that is just an exceptional point, a really important point, because I know that there's a lot of feelings, uh, when it come, when we say the word racism, a lot of things maybe come up within people, when we say the word racism or whatever, like, Well, maybe it's defensiveness, maybe it's a feeling of fear, maybe it's a feeling of, um, guilt or something. A lot of things come up. But I think it's important to name those things and I think naming the fear is very important, really important.

Tony Chvala-Smith 20:49

Yeah, it really, it really is. And I, you know, of course, we, we can't, we can't change the past. We can change the future, um, by altering course in the present. Um, I obviously wish that Christian communities had grappled with this better than they have over the centuries. Now, it's a, it's a mixed picture. There are, there have always been Christians in all communions that have acted on the basis

of the love of God in Christ in anti-racist ways or anti-sexist ways. There's always been that. On the other hand, racism and sexism and a variety of isms get embedded in structures. And I think that's, the idea of structural racism seems kind of hard for lots of my American friends to get. And that's partly because of the individualism in the culture, right? I somehow have magically, by, by my own, by my own gifts and abilities and my own fortitude and my own, uh, gumption, I have made myself into what I am and I don't have any racist feelings towards anybody. Well, this, this kind of thinking is mythological. It's not just about feelings, right? It's about the structures you have benefited from and have benefited in return. Um, one, one can harbor no racist feelings and yet on the basis of fear or misguided politics or whatever vote for people who are racist and who, and, or who do, who do want to promote racist, uh, policies and practices. Um you can do it ignorantly or you can do it knowingly. Um, and another thing, too, is that, that racism gets embedded in economic structures. It's totally embedded in economic structures in the United States. You can just start looking at data to see that. Uh, look at, look at, um, life expectancies in zip codes that are highly African American and highly urban and see how much lower the life expectancy is. Or you can look at, uh, census data and, uh, like economic data, and see that, alright, currently in the United States, at least in 2020, uh, women on average earned 84 cents to every dollar men earned. But if you, if you, if you shift that to what about women of color, then it drops down into the low 60s, right? And, so, how does that happen? Well, it, the, one of the problems with racism is the invisible ways that it creates visible harm. And, so, you, it's hard to trace where it comes from, but you can trace where it comes from. And, uh, in, several, several years ago, uh, Charmaine and I were doing a new, a new class with undergraduate, undergraduates at Graceland. The class we titled, uh, Making Meaning from Suffering and Loss. And we had a segment on, on, a segment on sexism and a segment on racism because, you know, sexism and racism are sources of suffering for people. So, in the, in the, uh, segment on racism, Charmaine had found with, uh, I think it was, uh, Bread for the World, it found a simulation that we played with our students. We had 26 students and the simulation, uh, divided students randomly into black students and white students. And we had a mixed class anyway, but some of the, some of the African American students had to play white roles and some of the white students played African American roles just as kind of the luck of the draw. And, and so it was quite illuminating for them. But essentially what it did was it started, it started just after the American Civil War and you gained or lost stuff depending on laws that were passed. These are actual historical laws that were passed. And by the time you get to the end of the game, you see the actual evidence of how laws past, like housing laws, or banking laws, um, how, how actual legislation that was passed in the United States historically, how it had a direct impact on people of color, right? And, so, by the time we got to the end of the game, it's like, you, you, you can actually see how racism gets enfolded in, in social, political, economic structures. And then it's hard, it's hard for the perpetrators, it's harder for the perpetrators then to, to, to see what they've done because they're benefiting from it, right.

Tony Chvala-Smith 25:39

And that was one of the great things that students learn from the experience is, is who, who benefited from law after law after law from the 1860s on. Um, for example, the GI Bill, right, after World War II, yet, it was different for white veterans than for black veterans. Right. And so, um, Chri, Christian theology understands structures. Uh, if I can go back to the idea of original sin, original sin, as a doctrine is the idea that, that selfishness is embedded everywhere. It takes different shapes and forms, but it's embedded everywhere. And it's passed on, right? We, we, we pass it on. Try as we may, we pass it on. So, Christian theology should have always understood structural sin. But what happened,

what happened in American religious history is that, uh, Christian faith got so individualized, right? It became so much about me and Jesus and me getting saved and so on that we, we tended at, plus it was mixed in with, with, uh, with the economic dream of me getting ahead and so on, and all that. Um, what happened in it is that, is that sin, sin has become understood, in American Christianity primarily as something I did, something I did wrong. And if I didn't feel like I did anything wrong, I must not have done anything wrong. And since I haven't, I haven't actually discriminated against any African American people that I know of, I'm not guilty of racism. It's like, No, you're wrong. Guilt here is not a feeling. Guilt is about complicity, right? And whether you feel it or not, you have been a beneficiary and a contributor to a system that is exploited and dehumanized other people. And once you know that, then certainly in, in Christian ethics, you have a moral obligation to do something different. So, anyway, uh, that's, that's a way to, to look at all this, Carla. And, um, I think it's really hard for churches, especially, you know, Community of Christ, we're a small denomination, um, and though we've rapidly grown in the Southern Hemisphere, we started in the Northern Hemisphere and so in the Northern Hemisphere, we've been primarily a white church. And we too, have been complicit in the cultural and economic forms of racism. Um, as a movement, we, we, often it's unwitting and sometimes it is witting. Uh, so, we're, I think we're coming to grips with that. But, uh, one of the things I argue in the paper is that a failure of all churches, in my view, is that when you're preparing people for baptism, or preparing people for confirmation, or preparing people for church membership, how, how much different would things be, if we said, for example, your, your faith, the church's faith in Jesus Christ as God incarnate, as one who represents all means this and this and this. It, it, it, it calls you to anti-racism, right? What if, what if at, at baptismal services, you know, a, candidates were asked some questions and asked to pledge themselves to some things like to stand against injustice, racism, uh, sexism, uh, white supremacy in all their forms? That would be appropriate. That would be an appropriate moral thing to ask of someone who's committing herself to Jesus Christ who represents every single person across history, who is the incarnation of the divine word for all. Uh, it would seem like that would be, you know, morally proper to ask, but, but, uh, we, we tend to privatize all this and not want to make demands on people, so.

Carla Long 25:42

Well. Yeah, absolutely. And, and like I was saying earlier, you know, like the words original sin and incarnation, you know, like, those, those might mean something to a lot of people and I know that they do, but, like, to an average person who hasn't studied theology or whatever, you know, saying the words incarnation and you're taking on the incarnation of Christ. That might not mean something to them, but the words anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-white supremacy, like, those words mean something to people. And, so, like, when you put it in those terms, it hits them a lot harder. I would think it would hit them a lot harder and, uh, make that baptism even more meaningful, uh, just because, you know, like, sometimes the theology kind of gets in the way and we get a, we're okay with the flowery language and things (Right.) like that. But those words, man, they mean something in today, for us today.

Tony Chvala-Smith 30:28

Yeah, and, and you can make that, you can make the other words simpler just by saying something like, you use biblical passages to do this, you know, uh, in Christ God was reconciling the world. Um, or you can use Doctrine and Covenants passage, uh, the, you know, The worth of Souls is great in the sight of your Lord and Redeemer, right, from Doctrine and Covenants, I don't know, 16 or 17. Um, you, you can make it simple. Um, In Jesus Christ, God has claimed every single person as beloved.

Therefore, here's what the Church calls you to do as part of your belovedness and the belovedness of others. You will stand against racism, you will stand against sexism, you will, you know, you will, you will, uh, reject policies and practices and language and, and words that harm others based on, on differences or gender or whatever. I mean, there's things, things you could do. We just don't make it explicit enough for people, Carla. Um, and then Christianity becomes a private feeling, private spirituality that leaves, that leaves our complicity and social structures untouched, which is really a mistake. It's really, really a mistake.

Carla Long 31:51

Yeah, it sounds like a mistake. And, you know, I, we haven't mentioned this yet, but we talked about it before we were going to do this. But, I mean, in a way, this, you and I, two white people, talking about this is not the way it should be either. Uh, two white people talking about these structures that we, uh, we really haven't known personally either in some ways, right?

Tony Chvala-Smith 32:13

Yeah, absolutely. Um, here I am in my, in my mid 60s. I'm an academic. I'm a minister and so on. And I'm, I'm still learning about my, my own complicity in stuff. I have, I'm, I'm totally a beneficiary of, of, uh, the white male system. And even at times in my past when I thought I had overcome that and left that behind, you, you, you do things, say things. One's, one's beloved partner points things out and you realize, Oh, my gosh. I've got a long way to go. This, this journey ain't over yet. And, so, so this also becomes a part of spiritual practice, right? Um, anti-racism involves politics and social structures. It also involves individual practice as well. Um, recognizing, uh, attitudes it, that you've inherited or fostered or not dealt with. Um, reactions: where they come from. Uh, trying to get in touch with your own original fear and letting the love of God find new space in that, in that place. There's, there's all kinds of spiritual practice that needs to go into this. But the church needs to be a place that's talking about that, right? This, the, the church needs to be a community that wants to practice anti-racism.

Carla Long 33:34

Well, you know, uh, I was just thinking about this the other day and I think I might rant about this in my sermon coming up this coming Sunday, but, you know, church should be at its best the great equalizer that's where, like, I can surround myself with people that I only want to be around for most of my life. I can surround myself with my family and my friends and I get to choose and control who is in my life for the most part. But at church, you don't get that control. You don't know who's going to walk through those doors. You don't know whose stories you're going to hear and who, about people's lives. And, so, church should be, at its best, a place where you are opened up to different ways of living, different ways of being, all different kinds of people. And that's, I think that's the way church should be. It should be, uh, A. an equalizer and B. an opening up of a place where we can, where we aren't in control, because I'm in control of a lot of my life.

Tony Chvala-Smith 34:31

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. And, I mean, uh, it, it's, you know, it's, it's easy just to declare, Oh, I love all people. And then the, the person who wants to sit next to you in the pew, not, not that one so much, but, you know, it's, uh, church and Christian communities are so essential because that's where we have to come up against the inner stuff that has not been sufficiently brought before the bright light of

the Incarnation, right? Um, it's, it's so easy to deal with you, Carla, on a Zoom screen, but, you know, being with you all the time, more complicated.

Carla Long 35:13

I think that Kuzma would completely agree with you on that.

Tony Chvala-Smith 35:18

And I'm so glad Charmaine isn't here because then she could, she could say, Yeah, I, I work with Tony day in and day out. Uh, it's, it's troubling and difficult.

Carla Long 35:28

And at times arduous, to quote our Doctrine and Covenants. Uh, (It is. Communities) building community can be arduous and even painful at times. I actually quote that all the time. I think that's my most quoted Doctrine and Covenants quote.

Tony Chvala-Smith 35:40

Absolutely. But you know what, here's the thing. Jesus formed a community, he didn't form a bunch of spiritual soloists, right, who are off on their own, right? He, he intentionally formed a community because he knew community was gonna' be really, really bloody hard. And this is, we're gonna', in, in community, you find you need grace, all the time. That's actually a good place for us human beings to be is finding that we need grace all the time.

Carla Long 36:06

It is, because, um, I know that, for me, I give myself a lot of passes. And there are times when I shouldn't give myself passes. And so grace is good. And grace is great. But there are other times when I really need to hold myself accountable. And that community really helps me to do that. So, that's a really important thing.

Tony Chvala-Smith 36:27

Yeah, absolutely. I, I think currently in American culture, systems and churches are being held accountable for complicity in racism. And we really have, we really have to deal with this. We, we really, really can't just let things go on as they have been. We can't, we can't continue to foster a culture in which, uh, it's okay for police officers simply to gun down a, a young, a young black kid, you know, uh, without consequences. Um, it's, we, we really have to deal with the economic disparity that first slavery and then racism embedded in structures has, has caused for a huge number of Americans. Um, the, if the church wants to teach and preach and practice the kingdom of God, the church needs to be the place where we are, we are dealing with this. And that's going to make that's going to be difficult, because it's going to bump us up against the political divides that are among church members. But, but, again, um, if the bedrock doctrine, if the Archimedean point of our Christian life and faith is the Incarnation, then there aren't a lot of options here, right? Either we're going to be faithful to the doctrine of the Incarnation and uphold that every human being is of equal worth and, therefore, the social structures that we are embedded in need to change to represent that. Either we're going to, either we're going to reflect that or we're going to fail. We're going to, we're going to fail the central thing that we

bel, claim we believe. So, um, and there's, really it's would the, churches have failed too often in this. It's, it's time for us not to fail on it. So, um, yeah.

Carla Long 38:17

Well, that is, that is a hard task to live up to, Tony. Um, it shouldn't be. It really, really shouldn't be. But it is. As you said, the political climate makes it a, a political thing and a lot of people do not believe that politics should be in church when, um, it def, definitely should. Um, and, so, anyway, it's just a, aahhh, it, it, it fills me with a little bit of that, what we were talking about earlier, fills me with that fear, like, what's going to happen, you know, if, if we, if we stand up and do these things that we know that God is calling us to, what happens next? And I, I guess our job as members of Community of Christ, am, is to make sure that we're going where God is calling us to go and let the rest fall in place.

Tony Chvala-Smith 39:13

Yeah. As, uh, as my, uh, friend, colleague and boss, Zach Harmon-McLaughlin likes to say again and again and again, we're not called to be successful, we're called to be faithful. And, so, uh, that, that is a tall order, but particularly on questions of racism, the church really needs to step up. Uh, for example, what, when, when things open, fully open, whatever post pandemic life looks like, what would it, what difference would make for the Temple sanctuary to be used for, uh, a Martin Luther King Day celebration, a, a community wide Martin Luther King Day celebration? That would be a way for Community of Christ to say, We, we want to be part of this. We want to be part of, of the, you know, uh, Doctor King's, the, the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice, we want to, we want to be walking on that arc, right? And what, what about local Community of Christ congregations? Whatever things look like in the future when, when whatever normal looks like in the future, what if local Community of Christ congregations become places that, that celebrate Martin Luther King Day as a way to say, We want to be an anti-racist church? We want to, we want to be a place that celebrates the full equality and dignity of all human beings because we, because by the way, we happen, we happen to worship a dark skinned Mediterranean dude named Jesus. He's definitely not European, right? And, so, uh, let's, let's step up here. So, there's, there's lots, lots of work to do. And I, as a theologian, want to make sure that the work is grounded in our deepest values and convictions that's grounded in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. So, that's, that seems to be a way ahead for us.

Carla Long 41:05

Well, thank you so much, Tony. I, I don't know how much, I don't know if you have anything else to add that, that, what you've said, so far, has been, um, thought provoking for me and hopefully for the listeners. Was there anything else you wanted to talk about before we close?

Tony Chvala-Smith 41:20

I think, yeah, I've got one more thing, Carla. I'll, I'll end with a quote that I use in the paper, but it's one of my favorite quotes from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. And, uh, this is, this is a, a thing he wrote in his book, Nachfolge, which means discipleship. The Cost of Discipleship is how it's usually rendered in English. But, um, he, he says this, and I just love this. Sometimes I will post it on Facebook at Christmas time. Quote, It is none other than God who assumes human form and comes to us. Christ has taken this human form. He becomes a human being like us. In his humanity and lowliness we recognize our own form. He became like human beings so that we would be like him. In Christ's incarnation, all of

humanity regains the dignity of bearing the image of God. Whoever, from now on attacks the least of people, attacks Christ, who took on human form, and who in himself has restored the image of God for all who bear a human countenance. End quote.

Carla Long 42:26

Amen. Amen. Thank you so much, Tony, for sharing all that. And thank you for your thoughts on this. I really appreciate it. And I appreciate you.

Tony Chvala-Smith 42:36

Thank you, Carla, I appreciate you and the opportunity to, to share this work. And, uh, you know, for all of us, it's, it's ongoing, ongoing spiritual work and political work and ethical work. It's, it's, gets to the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, I believe. And, so, that's going to always be a journey, but it's a journey I think we really want to be on.

Carla Long 42:59

Absolutely. Thanks again, Tony.

Josh Mangelson 43:00

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