

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 Carla Long, your host for Percolating on Faith, a place where we discuss whatever we want to discuss because that's the kind of people we are. We always have these wonderful guests on, Charmaine and Tony Chvala-Smith. Hi, Charmaine. Hi, Tony. (Charmaine: Hi, Carla. Tony: Hi, Carla.) Welcome back. And thank you so much for being here again. (Tony: Our pleasure.) Tonight, we're going to be talking about the spirituality of place. When Tony and Charmaine floated this idea to me, I wasn't exactly sure what they meant. Then they started discussing it, and then I totally got it. It's the idea that certain places are spiritual to certain groups of people. I have understood that from a very, very young age. I've gone to church camp in, near Joplin, Missouri, since I was basically born. I always knew driving in there and driving down the cedar lined driveway, that I was going to find God at this place. I expected it. I went in with intention and I knew that God would meet me there. I always had incredible experiences there. And now, as I've grown up, I've been to campgrounds all over the United States, all over the world, and I know that people walk into those places, with the same feelings that I had when I was a kid. And so, I totally understand at an emotional level what the spirituality of place is. Tony and Charmaine are so good at just bringing it all together and helping me put that thinking piece together, because I'm a feeler, I ain't no thinker.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:12

Well, that's not true.

Carla Long 02:15

A little bit true. So, I can't wait to talk about the spirituality of place so that we can have a discussion about that, rather than just my feeling of it. So, go ahead.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:29

I was just gonna say, how is it that we have these connections to God and to places, even in locations that have a place called Rattlesnake Ridge?

Carla Long 02:47

Oh, my gosh, you know, Joplin!

Tony Chvala-Smith 02:50

We know that campground. Yes. (Charmaine: In spite of the danger, perceived or mythical!) We know another campground that has a place called Mosquito Valley.

Carla Long 03:00

Oh, that sounds fun.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 03:05

Yeah, and yet, you know, even as we named the realities of some of these places, there's also this whole other dimension of experience, whether that's experience of community, or typically more common is experience of God, in a variety of ways that's maybe more real in some times and places in our lives. So yeah, I think it's a fascinating topic.

Carla Long 03:39

It absolutely is. I was at a campground not so long ago. We are sleeping on these cloth mattresses, not the plasticky ones that wake you up every time you move, but the cloth ones and I am 99% sure there was a dead mouse in my in my mattress. So that's what I chose to do. And I still had this incredible week. So why are sacred places so important in Community of Christ spirituality and theology?

Tony Chvala-Smith 04:05

That's a good question. As you were starting off, I think you had your mind around one part of an answer for it. And that is, we have these special places in Community of Christ, typically campgrounds and going there for a reunion or a camp or retreat, did something like focus us. Right? So, you know, theologically speaking, God is accessible everywhere. God is omnipresent. That's a basic claim about God and yep, gathering with members of the community for a weekend at a retreat at one of these places does something that gives us a sense of purpose. It focuses us in the same way that a piece of bread and a cup of juice focuses on Christ in communion. In other words, the place, the real time and real space and real place and a real event with real people are sacramental. To me, that's part of what's going on there.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 05:21

Yeah, I think another part of it is that when we come together in places, especially places where nature is integral to what we're doing, we're creating a space in the world where we're trying to live in a different way. I remember Tony talking about his first reunion, and one of the things somebody there said was this is a taste of Zion. It was something I heard growing up, too, particularly at family camps or youth camps. In some way, it was a taste of Zion. The thing is, for me, it's that we create this space where we remind ourselves and each other what it means to not only encounter God, but what it means to try to live together in a way that's different, or more authentic, or more kind, than the ways in which we live in the world around us. We separate ourselves from some of the influences out in the world, and we choose to live in some new kinds of influences. And I think it's like when you're with a child who is learning something new, if there's affirmation, and if they can see the growth within themselves, then they flourish, and they bloom, and they find confidence in these new things developing in them. I think that's what happens to a whole group of people when they come together intentionally. They're creating space for a new kind of reality in their midst that is dependent on God. Whatever their vision of God, it's still what God can do in us. That is this other influence.

Tony Chvala-Smith 07:38

Yeah. So, we have this time, in this place to make that kind of space for God's influence in us. I think that's certainly been part of my experience. Charmaine mentioned the place when I first went to a Community of Christ church camp. I was 19 years old. I was a fairly new member of the church. I was

young adult, and the place was Sanford in Central Michigan, Sanford campground. It's still a Community of Christ camp. And yes, it was a foretaste of Zion. Let me tell you a little bit about the foretaste of Zion.

Carla Long 08:13

I can't wait.

Tony Chvala-Smith 08:15

Centerfield in the ball diamond was also right about where the drain field was from the shower house. You probably know where this is going. So once there were more than 200 people on the campgrounds and the shower house and bathrooms were getting a pretty good workover, centerfield, let's just say, got a little spongy. I remember running for fly balls across centerfield. This is pretty much what it sounded like, whoosh, whoosh, whoosh. But you know, we loved every minute of it. It was sacred time. It was time building community and being with people from several congregations to worship and to play and to clean restrooms and to serve lunch. I don't know why I put those in that order. It's probably not good. But you know what I mean? We were building community together. It was for a week, from Saturday afternoon to the following Saturday, midday. As a 19-year-old, brand new to the church, I found it absolutely extraordinary to live like that for a week. And there are lots of beautiful places on the campground, too. I don't want to give the wrong impression. It's on Sanford Lake. It's a gorgeous, gorgeous place to go. But you know, Zion, the foretaste of Zion, was a tangible experience of communal living that we built and shared during the week. And it didn't matter that centerfield got a little bit sloppy and dirty during the week.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 10:19

Yeah, and I think another part of it is that when we make ourselves available to community, when we make ourselves available to God, we're making ourselves vulnerable, in a new way, as well. I grew up not going regularly to one of our congregations because we lived about one hundred miles away from the nearest one. But I went to camp, and camp was the place where the church had formed for me. But more than that, it was the place where God became real to me. And so, as a quiet, timid youth, camp was the place where I first really could believe that God knew me, that I wasn't just one of seven kids in the family, and one of the twins, but that God knew me, and God cared about me. And so those places that I went to camp held the reality of that possibility. Humans are built to make associations, to make associations with place and feeling. People's feelings about the home they grew up in, whether bad or good, get settled into them. I think it's the same with the places where God becomes real and when we become real to God. Those camps helped me find a new center to who I was. I wasn't just one of the Shivalik kids. I was someone specific to God, and God was specifically available to me. That meant camp and reunion were places of re-anchoring myself in the world, and in a sense of having a purpose that might be connected to who God was or what God wants for all of creation. So, it goes deeply into our psyches, I think.

Tony Chvala-Smith 13:09

From the time where we're born, we're hardwired to the places around us. Spatially it gives us inner coordinates. Where I grew up in Central Michigan, the land is mostly farmland. It rolls. There are woods, swamps, farm fields, beautiful upland woods in the fall, and lots of cedar swamps and pine

forests. The land is set out on mile square sections that goes back into the early 1800s when it was first surveyed. It's so funny how to this day, one of my difficulties with living in Missouri is that the land is not in mile square sections. When you travel in the Missouri countryside, you can't go around the section, like in a square. It's not set out that way. It follows all kinds of other paths. That mile square sectioning is imprinted in my head. And so, I tend to think of space like that. So space, becomes part of our person, in our psyche, based on where we grew up, and what we first experienced and encountered. And amazingly, God is a God of meeting us in spaces. God seems to like to encounter us in the concrete stuff of our life, and that includes the places that are most real and most beloved to us.

Carla Long 14:57

I feel like that's moving into Community of Christ spirituality and theology and these sacred places being important in that. Can you speak a little bit more about that?

Tony Chvala-Smith 15:11

Yeah, I mean, we, we have sacred places in our history, Palmyra, Kirtland, Independence, Far West, Nauvoo, though for Community of Christ people, Nauvoo a little less, usually. Nauvoo is a kind of an ambiguous place in our spirituality. Then when you get into the Reorganization, we have you know, places in Wisconsin and Illinois, Plano, Illinois and, and trying to think of the place in Wisconsin, Voree, I think it is, and then Lamoni, Iowa, and eventually Independence, Missouri. We connect the journey of the church with these places. Going to these places is reconnecting ourselves to the story of our people. Lots of Community of Christ people love to go to Kirtland, because Kirtland, for us in our theology is a symbol of the movement that was begun by Joseph Smith, Jr, kind of a symbol of it at its best. And when I say at its best, I'm fully aware of all the issues and struggles and problems that were there, but that doesn't matter with a symbol so much. So, place reminds us of gatherings, reminds us of Zion, and the Temple in Independence then has become, for us, another of those very special places where we always expect to encounter God.

Carla Long 16:46

And for me, I think that that expectation is one of the reasons that we do encounter God at those places. When we walk into somewhere expecting that, we usually find what we're expecting.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 17:00

Yeah, that's very true. As Tony and I were talking earlier about this, trying to think of different ways of approaching it, I was remembering our reunion in Michigan. One of our responsibilities, I'm not sure if Tony was doing it this time, I think it was just maybe me, I had a young adult class. As sometimes happens with young adult classes at reunion, we started out with about four. By the end of the week, we had 12 to 15. Some of them didn't come for the whole week. They maybe just came in the morning or afternoon for the young adult activity and maybe for the service at night. We started talking together about how many of the young adults that were there, in a group of about fifteen, actually go to church. Less than half regularly go to church. Yet, coming to the campgrounds was really important to them. For them, the campgrounds were a place where they got to go to youth camps, where they'd had these experiences, both of community, but also that immediate connection to a God experience that was so deeply anchored in them, it caused this hunger. And, you know, once they came to the first young adult class, they were there for the rest of the week because it was like reconnecting to that need within

them. For most of them, it wasn't necessarily a connection to the church, but it was more about a connection of what the church stands for, in the form of community, and a caring place where people know that they are safe and accepted and going to be reminded of who they truly are as God's children, as people of worth. And so, they came with that expectation. Simply being, knowing it's possible, makes it possible and is the foundation then for building on for the next time and the next time. It was such an interesting thing to me, how many of the young adults came. They wouldn't miss coming to at least part of the reunion if they could. But they didn't really sense that they found that same thing in congregational life. It's partly because of what you were just saying about that expectation that that openness that, that remembering that God in a real way had met them in this place.

Tony Chvala-Smith 20:18

Yeah. I'm thinking about Moses, his burning bush experience in Exodus, chapter three. You know what, any Bush can burn. God can come to us through any means. It could have been any bush on any mountain, but because we're creatures of time and space, God encounters us in a specific time and space and that place becomes sacred to us. It could just as well have been the place down the road, but we weren't there. Right? So, where we are is the place where God wants to meet us. That was our campgrounds for us. Especially in Community of Christ, they become burning bush places because they have a long track record of being encounter places.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 21:05

On the negative side of it, there's a danger with that, that we can somehow come to worship the places, rather than the fact that this is where God happened to meet us. Anyone who's familiar with any of our campground issues or struggles will see how true that is that changing the places where we might be open to meeting God is really hard sometimes, or letting go of places where the experience of God has been so real that we are willing to be divisive with each other over whether or not we develop a campground or sell a campground. So, there's the negative side of it, too, where we can put so much emphasis on the place, that it overshadows what happened there and who it happened with, being God.

Tony Chvala-Smith 22:09

It would be counterproductive in the Moses story if I said, oh, wow, I'm going to dig up this bush and take it with me. It's like, I'm going to create a portable shrub shrine everywhere I go. That's not the point, right?

Carla Long 22:24

I like this idea of a portable shrub shrine!

Tony Chvala-Smith 22:27

Well, don't go too far with it, Carla.

Carla Long 22:30

Well, I think that another danger is that we think that we can only meet God in a certain place, too. Like my family, we traveled two and a half hours to get to our campground near Joplin and we always got to stop at McDonald's, in Pittsburg, Kansas, and to me, if I can meet God at McDonald's while eating

McDonald's, when I was a kid was way better than any home food my mother used to make, all of that fried chicken and steak and everything she used to make from scratch. McDonald's was way better than that, you know? Yeah. But if I could have met God in that McDonald's, then that would be pretty awesome, too. But just thinking that God is only in those campgrounds is also pretty dangerous.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 23:11

Yeah, it is. I remember the campground that my family went to, when I was a young child. The first few camps that I went to through part of junior high, was Camp Yucateo, in Saskatchewan. Because of the cost of upkeep and the requirements, the provincial requirements, safety requirements, and all that kind of thing, the Saskatchewan district was not able to maintain that campground, and we had to sell it. We had to go far away to this other land in Alberta, to this foreign campground, with people I have not gone to camps with, well, a few, but not all of them. I remember the first [time], I wasted the first two or three days of camp crying over the fact this wasn't Camp Yucateo, and it wasn't like it had been there. By the end of the week, I was in a better spot. Sometimes we become blind to where God is because we're still hanging on to the places where we've met God before.

Tony Chvala-Smith 24:31

This reminds me of a story from the Desert Fathers that I love. It's a story about an Abba and his disciple. The Abbas were spiritual masters of the desert in the fourth and fifth century. This Abba and his disciple are travelling by the sea, west of Alexandria and the disciple says to his master, "I'm thirsty." The Abba says, "You have a water skin? Fill it with seawater and I'll pray over it." That's what happens. It's a miracle story that the water turns sweet, and they drink their fill. As they start to turn inland, the disciple runs back and puts some more water into the skin and the Abba says, "Well, what are you doing?" The disciple says, "Forgive me, we're going to need more water later." The Abba looks at him and says, "God is here. God is everywhere," which is a cool story. If you can trust God in this one space, this one place, in this one moment, surely you can trust God anywhere else. It's interesting to me that in the story, the Abba doesn't say, "God is everywhere, God is here," which starts with an abstraction. Rather, the Abba starts with the concrete experience. "Yeah, we've met God here and we can therefore trust that when we get in the other places we go." That would be the theological genius of campgrounds. They are concrete places where we can meet God, but the point is not to stay at them. The point is to go out and live the good news of loving community elsewhere.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 26:31

So, they become reminders that God has met us in particular places, so that we can take that knowledge to other particular places and ask God to be there with us, too. It's like a practice,

Tony Chvala-Smith 26:46

We have seen and participated in baptisms at campgrounds, confirmations, ordinations, weddings, lots of sacraments of administration. There's something pretty cool about that, but there's always something cool about the sacraments, wherever you can participate in them. It is for lots of people, those special places become a marker for them, a concrete place they can remember where, gosh, this happened for me there. And thus, I can trust in the boundless goodness of God, anywhere and everywhere.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 27:30

I think there's another part, as you're talking about sacraments in sacred spaces. The idea of vulnerability comes to mind [while] thinking about your campground, Carla. At the very end of the week, the leaders of the reunion had sensed the burdens that so many of the adults were carrying, some were health issues, some were family situations, some were losses and deaths, lots of grieving, and physical concerns. At the end of the week there was kind of a service of administration. Anybody who wanted to be prayed for, hands placed on them with oil as an administration or Anointing of the Sick or not be anointed, but just have someone pray with them. There is an array of chairs set up front and people ready to come and lay hands and pray. People could share a little bit if they wanted to, but mostly they just came in and sat and asked for help, asked that other parts of the body come and pray, where they couldn't pray for themselves. I remember this older woman who went up to sit in one of the chairs. As the people were coming to lay their hands on her head, her granddaughter came up and stood beside her and put her hand on her grandmother's shoulder. It was so profound. It was amazing recognition of this grandmother's willing to be vulnerable, to say I need this body, I need this group of people, and I need your prayers and your support. Her granddaughter was one of the ones who understood the nonverbal language that was happening and responded with ministry. That's one of the things that happens when we're together like that, we make ourselves vulnerable. Things like the prayer of administration is not perfunctory. It takes on a different kind of meaning for the whole body. And even children understand and are responding to it. It's like a whole new, different lens through which we see what ministry means, what it means to be open, and being willing to share our struggles with each other. That's just a deeply imprinted image on my memory.

Carla Long 31:28

Well, it sounds like, that's a beautiful story. And I love that it happened at my home campground in the Ozarks. So, it sounds like we're moving into this. And we've kind of already touched on this, but how, how does the spirituality of place keep us connected to our vision of Zion?

Tony Chvala-Smith 31:48

That's an important question. And this is where the spirituality of place and the theology of place kind of overlap. In Community of Christ, we've been doing camping together since the 1880s. At first, they were called reunions. They were called reunions because congregations of Community of Christ people were so spread out, isolated, and often, as a sort of sectarian community misunderstood by neighbors. All the folks from a district or an area got together once a year. In the 1880s and after, it was much longer than a week, sometimes it was two weeks. They were very long experiences. It helped reconnect everybody to each other, to our story as a people on pilgrimage to our vision, especially to our vision of the Kingdom of God on earth. So, place for us keeps reminding the church that it's not about heaven, it's about "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth." That's certainly not to diss the idea of an afterlife. It's that the focus of Jesus' message was the Reign of God, here and now. That has been the focus of Community of Christ, very often in its history. Being in a place reminds us of the importance of bringing the transforming power of Christ into the concrete places of our life.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 33:39

And I think it does something else, too. It shifts us away from thinking that Zion, or the Peaceable Reign or Peaceful Kingdom, is not first and foremost about assenting to a particular list of beliefs. Within the church, at some points in the past, our rightness was because we had the right list of beliefs, but camps

and reunions and those places that called from us something else, like reunions, like camps, they called us to live it, not just to hold a set of ideas. I think that was a really good corrective in our past, to remind us that what God was about in the world was in some ways primarily about how is it we will live together, how is it that we will live together within the natural world in harmony with it, how is it that we will put up with our frustrations and annoyances with some people, how will we care for each other, whether it's cleaning the bathrooms, or covering the nursery in the evening so others can worship, or parents can have freedom to worship. It asks of us to let our love and our ideas take shape, in concrete action for each other, as well as letting what we do for each other be for our relationship with God. And so, I think it's just a really good corrective to the tendency we can have to say theology is about ideas. Theology is also, and just as importantly, about how we live what we believe, how we act on it.

Tony Chvala-Smith 36:05

Yeah, absolutely. And it's interesting that, especially in the last maybe 20 to 30 years, Community of Christ folks have started going to other people's sacred places, too. Community of Christ people go to Catholic retreat centers and monasteries for retreats. We go everywhere. We found that other people have this experience of sacred place and sacred space, and we know something about that. We can go to these places, and we can feel at home at them, too, because we have a tradition of sacred space that's really important for ecumenical and interfaith relations. It's a way that our theology and spirituality of place has opened us to other traditions and other ways of encountering the divine. I think that's, that's a pretty cool thing. One of the other things that comes to mind for me about our spirituality and theology of place is that it can take us back to what I would say is the central symbol of the Christian faith, and that is the incarnation. God became flesh. The Word became flesh in Jesus Christ, a concrete person, in a specific time in Palestine, in Roman occupied Palestine, in Galilee, during the time of Pontius Pilate and Tiberius. It was in that specific setting, in that specific space, that specific dirt and air and time that the Word became flesh. We don't worship a God who's an abstraction. We worship a God who became real in Christ. And so, having sacred places, if we're careful not to worship them, can remind us again and again and again, of the Incarnation, which is the beating heart of our theological tradition.

Carla Long 38:25

We don't use the words Kingdom of God all that often. How do these relate to the Kingdom of God? As well as Zion?

Tony Chvala-Smith 38:46

How do they relate if we want to use the phrase God's reign, God's reign on earth, God's reign and presence everywhere? Yeah, exactly.

Carla Long 38:59

These places are super important to us. There's no doubt about that. And it takes a lot of work to go camping and to go to these campgrounds. I'm a new mother, my daughter is four months old. I went to reunion with her this year, and I packed up my entire house to go. People made a little bit of fun of me because I may have had like three or four places for her to sleep. If we had to boil all of this down, why do we go through all this work? Why do we go to often substandard facilities, places we're not

used to? If we boiled it down just to one little thing, why do we go to these places? What is the most important thing that we find there?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 39:53

I wonder if it's a mix of things and for different people, different elements in that mix matter more than others. I think for some people, it's that yearning to find a place where they can be really themselves and be vulnerable and explore the spiritual sides of themselves, in ways that they can't anywhere else. I think for others, it's being reminded that there's a bigger community that they're a part of and that's somehow tied to their understanding of who God is and who they are. I think for others the discomfort is helpful because in many times in our lives, discomfort often reminds us that we're alive. And though it's annoying, it stirs within us recognition of what's important to us and what isn't. I think for some it's a place of refuge, a place where they can be cared for, for a little while. Or where they can stay in their room for a little while and find peace. Or a place where they can do silly things they would never have done otherwise. I think about softball games or . . .

Carla Long 41:32

campfire songs where you have to shake your bottom in front of everyone.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 41:38

Exactly, and seeing people who are in their 70s and 80s, who are just thrilled to be able to do that, and to be there with their grandkids and their grandkids getting to see a side of them that they may never have seen before. So anyhow, I think it's a mix of things, but and it's different things for different people. I think that that desire for an authentic experience that is unadorned, not manufactured, it's raw, it's real, it's something that has to be generated by the group that's there. It's not going to be provided for them. It's reminding ourselves that simply being together, being open to God, letting God be part of our language and what we think about and talk about, makes something more real than then what we often experience in the rest of our lives. It's a good question, Carla thanks.

Tony Chvala-Smith 42:58

Charmaine used the words authentic and real. You asked, Carla, why do we go to all the work to pack up half a household to drive to some mosquito ridden, perhaps a rattlesnake ridge infested place where Community of Christ members have gathered for 50,60, 100 years, several times a year? Why do we do that? You could turn around to say, why do we do any work related to a relationship? You know, spirituality in the end is about the cultivation of our relationship with God in community. If that matters, then there are certain disciplines I will do to remind myself why it matters. And so, the work, and the driving and the distance and the effort and sometimes the discomfort and the volunteering for KP and the cleaning of urinals and all the stuff that is part of coming to these sacred spaces together, the spirituality of it is a very concrete way of cultivating and nurturing and growing in our relationship with God.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 44:34

I wonder if there isn't too, for some of us, that sense that we need to remind ourselves we're willing to sacrifice some things for the realness of the relationship with God and with each other, and that comfort is not our God. Security is not our God. Having complete control over the temperature and our

environment is not what life is about. But it's about making some kinds of sacrifices for the sake of something bigger than we are, maybe, for the sake of something that we feel deep inside us, [something] we're called to.

Tony Chvala-Smith 45:17

I tried to imagine what it was like for our ancestors in Community of Christ, who went to camps or a reunion, say around 1900, 1910, 1920. We've seen pictures. I have pictures of some of those reunions and I don't have any idea what the shower facilities were, if there were any. I know that they had to take stoves to cook on. You see old black and white pictures, the old type, the long pictures of a reunion at Cadillac, Michigan in 1909 and honest to goodness, they were dressed heavily for a Michigan summer, I would say.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 46:06

You see the men in suits and vests and long sleeve shirts and a tie and women in these long skirts with obviously, petticoats or layers underneath, and long sleeve shirts and high collared shirts. You're thinking, oh my gosh, it might help with the mosquitoes.

Tony Chvala-Smith 46:32

Yes, clothes kept the mosquitoes out, and the smell in.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 46:40

In that time period, you didn't dress necessarily for comfort. You dressed maybe not your best, but this was a special time. So, you dressed intentionally in ways for times of worship and times of reverence in God.

Tony Chvala-Smith 47:09

To pick up on Charmaine's sacrifice theme, those pictures of our ancestors gathering at sacred spaces for a week of camp or whatever, that was a sacrifice for them in lots of ways. They were working class. They had farms and cattle and land to take care of and small businesses. To do what they did to go to those sacred spaces for these experiences, it cost them. In our current cultural setting in the church, we are sometimes very afraid of the word sacrifice at all. It's important to remind ourselves that that following Jesus sometimes is not going to be comfortable and it's gonna demand things of us.

Carla Long 48:05

I'm really impressed by this answer that you both gave to this question because I thought the answer was gonna be super simple. It's like why do we do all this? Well, we want to go meet God. I thought that'd be the answer, but there is a lot more to it than just that because as we said, we can meet God anywhere. These places with sacrifice and with intention and with all these other things that go on with it, I knew that there is a reason why I feel good in certain places. You know, I directed reunion this year and I put in a lot of work, and a lot of people put in a lot of work towards it. It makes me laugh just a little bit. All that work is super important and necessary, but it's not what makes reunions special. What makes reunion special is what people bring, what each person brings and if people don't come bringing the best of themselves, their most authentic selves, the willingness to be vulnerable, then camp or

reunion isn't what it could be. There's a ton of work that goes into it, but it's not what makes reunion so incredibly special.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 49:34

Yeah, I think the work like that you did and that others did in preparation for worship, classes, activities, registration and all those kinds of things is what makes it possible. But what makes it happen is, as you say, what each person brings, their willingness to contribute to it, even the expectations that that might be disappointed. Sometimes people come looking for a particular spiritual experience or gift of the Spirit or emotional high. Even bringing the disappointment that may come when those expectations are not met, is the recognition that bringing those things that might disappoint us actually helps us refocus on what's most real. That is the desire behind those expectations, the desire to connect with a living God, who can be experienced and who can be responded to, and who can be felt. So, even our unreasonable expectations or unfounded expectations can be positive, helping us to be opened to seeking.

Tony Chvala-Smith 51:18

In our conversation, Carla, we focused a lot on campgrounds, reunions, and so on. Those experiences have been really formative for Charmaine and me, in fact, we met on staff at a senior high camp many, many years ago, but, the things that we're talking about apply to a congregation taking a pilgrimage to Independence, to the Temple, or a Mission Center taking a trip to Kirtland. There are all kinds of ways these things apply.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 51:50

Both Tony and I had the opportunity as young adults, to be mentored and be part of the family of Seventies in the church. I know for Tony, and this was true for me too, the homes of our mentors, were also places where the deep spiritual places within us were explored and provided us with the sense that there were safe places to ask questions, safe places to talk about God where you wouldn't feel like a freak, and where you could even talk about mystical things and ask questions about your own experience. Anyhow, I was thinking about that, too, about particular homes that became, I don't know if you'd say sacred, but reminded us of the sacred.

Tony Chvala-Smith 53:01

I think it's a really cool aspect of Community of Christ practice and theology, spirituality, this thing we have for places. And it's not that other traditions don't have things for places. The Celtic spiritual tradition has this phrase for certain unique spots that they call thin places, places where it seems like heaven and earth, like the boundary between heaven and earth is almost transparent. I think that's a cool image. And I'm a lover of cathedrals. For me, a cathedral, whether it's Catholic or Anglican, is a place that I feel very much at home. But you know what? I also feel at home in the woods, and you know, God is here, God is everywhere. It's kind of a way to sum up the theme.

Carla Long 53:55

It absolutely is. And I think that's a good place to close unless you both have something that you wanted to say that I didn't ask or something you forgot to say.

Tony Chvala-Smith 54:08

Not for me. Thanks, Carla, for asking us about that.

Carla Long 54:11

Well, I appreciate you putting all my feelings and emotions into words, as usual. So, thank you so much for being on the show. And I can't wait to have you guys back.

Tony Chvala-Smith 54:23

Hey, thank you very much, Carla. Take care.

Josh Mangelson 54:35

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