

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 you're listening to Percolating on Faith, uh, a podcast where we get together with our dear friends Charmaine and Tony Chvala-Smith and we talk about super duper smart things. And when I say we talk about super duper smart things, I mean, really, they talk about super smart things, and I just get to sit here and listen and feel smart. So, thank you, gentle listener for helping me feel smart once a month. I appreciate it. So, hello, Charmaine. Hello, Tony. Welcome back.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:04

Hi, Carla. Good to be with you. And the truth of things is probably that we, we talk so much that we hardly ever make any room for you to have any input, but we really appreciate having this time with you. And the really good questions you bring.

Carla Long 01:21

Oh, well. I, I'm a good question asker. That's true. Thanks for that. So, today, we're gonna' talk about, and this is like the short title, Why do bad things happen to good people? And I'm quite interested in this because, I'm gonna' let you know, I'm one of the goodest people I know. (And humblest, it sounds like.) And the humblest, as well. And there are some bad things that happen to me. So, I don't think bad things should happen to me, because I am so, so good. There is a super, there's like definitely a theology behind that when people think that and when people wonder that question. So, can we talk about, a little bit about maybe the theology behind that first, like, (Absolutely.) Why is that even a question that people have?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:03

Right. (Yeah.) Well, I mean, it really, this is exactly the point. There is, there's some assumptions behind even that question, Why do bad things happen to good people? I mean, it's basically suggesting that there's, that the, the way things should be, is that only good things should happen to good people. So, that's already a theological statement that's being made, that somehow good people, if they're really good, shouldn't ever suffer. They shouldn't ever lose, have loss or grief. And, so, I think as you, we start to say that, people might begin to see what some of the problems are with that assumption that somehow that's how God set it up, as though good people shouldn't suffer. So, I mean, that's one, one of the assumptions that's already in the, in the question.

Tony Chvala-Smith 03:02

And another assumption that's in the question is one, I'm going to frame it this way, and you, as a mathematician are going to like the way I frame it, that the, the, the, the question presumes that the universe functions by a kind of moral calculus. Right? In other words, uh, X should yield this, Y should

yield this, all the time. And the, the question really is, where did that moral calculus come from? Why, why would one assume that to start with? And, uh, what does it mean that our actual experience does not, uh, follow, does not, uh, compute with that. So, um, and we'll, eventually we'll get to where some of that moral calculus idea comes from. It does come from religious traditions, but, but it's (Also it's philosophy. It's ancient philosophy.) Yep. And, so, uh, these, these assumptions are built into the question. The question seems innocent at first, but, but most, pretty much all, I'll say, questions of a theological nature always presuppose or assume something, or already have a starting point that may itself need to be questioned. So, uh, also, I mean, other things that could be questioned about that, that's, that, that question is, What do you mean by good? Right? So, uh, good, good is itself a question-begging term. So,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 03:47

It's a relative thing. (Um hmm.) Yeah, how, how are you measuring that a person is good. And, and also, you might also question what is a situation that is bad? What makes something bad? Is it just because it makes us uncomfortable? Or it, it doesn't give us what we want? Or it might be evil or bad, but we, we also have to look at that. So, one of the things that (. . .) those assumptions, those theological assumptions, uh, point to is that they point to this idea that somehow God's major role is to make us happy and successful and comfortable. And, and then we have to ask, Is that really the God that we know? Um, and, so, that's where we start to help people unpack the assumptions that are there. And, yeah, there may be a lot of people who think that God's main role in the universe is that I personally have a comfortable life. Right? And we want to believe that. But it, but there's no precedent for that. I mean, look at, go to the Old Testament, look at the people who are doing God's will. The prophets, well, what happens to them? Well, gosh, they're ostracized. They're, they're made fun of. They're not listened to. They're not taken seriously. Uh, you know, doing the things God wants us to do does not mean, there's not promises that it's gonna' to be easy or that we're gonna' to be comfortable. So, New Testament, um, Jesus' most faithful followers. Well, you know, some of them were crucified, some of them were killed by the Romans. Ehh, so why do we think that what God wants most for us is to be, you know, rich and famous or comfortable and successful? Uh, we have to question what, what is it we think God is? Do we think God is our, our personal valet? And, and this question kind of points to that, that somehow we think that, um, God's main job is my comfort. So, some, some ways to start looking at what's behind the question. It's a valid question to ask why is there suffering? Um, and we'll, we're going to look into some of the, the ways in which that has been answered theologically, um, in popular culture, but also, um, some, some of the kind of enduring theological approaches to suffering that don't make God our, our,

Tony Chvala-Smith 07:13

Our servant, our slave.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 07:15

Yeah. Exactly. Or doesn't make the universe about us, about me. Um, and I think that's important.

Tony Chvala-Smith 07:23

And when you think about it, uh, how, how is it that finite creatures, there was a time when we weren't, there will be a time when we aren't, finite creatures who have limits, who have bodies, who our bodies,

who have, uh, you know, pain receptors, on, on what grounds would we assume that, uh, a universe in which we live would not be filled with risk, trial, struggle, pain? And, in other words, (. . .) Yes. Where I'm getting towards is that somewhere behind that question, it depends on the culture, it's asked in, but somewhere behind that question when it's asked, say, in, uh, the north, the, the American context, the North American context, the northern hemisphere context, sometimes when that question is asked, uh, behind it, is the assumption that, that our lives should be free from anything that's dis, uncomfortable, and, and, uh, that causes struggle. It's, like, Hmm, that's, uh, where does that come from? And actually, one place it comes from, I think, is insecurity. Are, are, we, we are justifiably insecure beings because of our finitude, right? That's, that's partly

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 08:40

We know we're gonna' die. (Yeah.) We know that we're vulnerable. right?

Tony Chvala-Smith 08:44

Right. And, so, we, we're always, we're always looking for a theory or a formula or something that will, that will somehow make the universe function like a clock for us, right? And, and, so, in other words, what we're trying to do here is just unravel a lot of assumptions that are built into the question.

Carla Long 09:01

Well, it jumps back into that moral calculus thing. Calculus is, and I'm just going to do the definition of calculus right now, is (. . .) a systematic way of describing systems that change. So, we are so desperate to figure out a system, so, if I do this, then I get this, because it feels so good to know that me, uh, I don't know, helping an old lady across the street is going to get me \$10 in the future. You know, like that feels so good to know. And I want, I want that to, to know that because we are insecure. You're absolutely right. So, it goes back, everything goes back to math.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 09:36

It does. And it, and it also goes back to this psychological desire, need for control. What you're describing is, um, this assurance that we have control over what will happen to us, and, and we assume God is gonna' go along with us on that. And, and do God's part.

Tony Chvala-Smith 09:59

And I, and I just want to say, Carla, when you, when you were starting to go into a de, definition of calculus, I was beginning to feel, uh, inwardly existential terror and I was wondering where God was in that moment because it was so frightening to hear a definition of calculus that, that I, I thought I was alone and abandoned in the universe for a second there. But I feel better now.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 10:21

For our gentle listeners, you might be gathering that Tony has a little phobia of math, a little traumatized by it. But anyhow. Ah, so, when this question is asked, Why do bad things happen to good people, in our culture, there, there tends to be three kind of little pat answers that you'll hear. And, so, we're gonna' to give those to you and then we're going to, um, unpack them a little bit, uh, maybe trash them a little bit. That's really where we're headed, so, just, just saying. (Unpacking . . .) So, these are ones that you've probably heard or you might embody yourself because we absorb them. We absorb them

from the culture around us because sometimes they help. Sometimes they make momentary sense of the suffering that we feel or that we see others feeling. So, one that's really popular, and I would say very dangerous, is everything happens for a reason. And that one, um, it's, it's saying a lot of things, but not really claiming them. So, it's saying, well, everything, but it's point, it's usually you said as a theological statement. And it's implying that everything that happens, God is orchestrating it. Well, that's really not very satisfying because it implies that everything, including bad or evil things, are God's will or that God made it happen. And, so, when you think about wars that are happening, when you think about atrocities, when you think about rape, when you think about child abuse, when you think about all of these things, you have to ask yourself, Did God make this happen? Did God let this happen? Is, is it God who, is it, it's, you know, there's this everything happens for reasons suggests that there's this, this huge, uh, blueprint and that everything that happens is part of that blueprint and that God planned it and wanted it, that this is God's will. And, so, we have to, this is not very satisfying when we say everything happens for a reason because it's saying that God is the orchestrator or the creator of evil and, um, and makes bad things happen to people on purpose.

Tony Chvala-Smith 13:02

And, and with, and with each of these we'll articulate, you have to ask, you really need to step back and ask question, What is the imagined character of God? Or, who is doing such things? Right? (Right.) So, what, how do we imagine the attributes here.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 13:16

What kind of God is this? (Yeah.) Um, but the reason I think this one gets so much play is because it's very convenient. When you say everything happens for a reason, you can step back, you don't have to get involved. You don't have to identify what system is creating this evil, this oppression, this suffering and do anything about it because, well, that's just the way things are. That's how they're gonna' to be. And, um, so, it's really, um, there's nothing we can do to change things, so, we won't. We won't even worry ourselves about it. And, in fact, this, this is kind of the, the, the back door for, this is a, a theological back door when people don't know what to say. And when they don't know how to engage in other people's suffering. It's like, Well, everything happens for a reason. Um, so, it's, it's a way to say, Too bad for you. You know, this, this all has to have some, um, and this can become also very fatalistic, fatalistic meaning, Well, things are just going to be the way they are and, so, there's no room for hope. There's no room for personal development or wanting to change or grow, uh, change situations around us. And fatalism can, can kill hope and dreams in people. And, you know, I don't think we think about that when we hear, Well, everything happens for a reason, but that's definitely one of the places it goes. And, and, so, this idea is really not substantively Christian.

Tony Chvala-Smith 15:08

In fact, the, when, when people say this, everything happens for a reason, they may not recognize that what they're doing is they're channeling, uh, ancient stoic philosophy, right? The, the, the stoic philosophers were trying to make sense of their lives, uh, in, in terms of questions of suffering and so on and basically they, they concluded, look, uh, the universe is rational, because we can make certain sense out of it. And they, they, they had this principle of reason that's, reason is em, embedded in everything and reason is the all controlling principle. And whatever happens is what reason wants, right, what, what rationality wants, and it can't happen other than how rationality wants. And by the way,

in, in stoic mythology, they held that the, the, the universe began in a kind of a cosmic explosion. Sorta' sounds a little big bangish, but began as sort of a cosmic, uh, explosion, and it was going to go out and then come back in and start over again. And everything would happen the same way next time through the cycle, right? Groundhog Day over and over and over again. And, so, where did they go with this? Ah, well, this was the way the stoic was able to, uh, practice in the virtue of apatheia, Greek word for apathy basically. Passionlessness, uh, don't, don't sweat it. It's, it's all gonna' to happen the same way. This is how reason ordained it. Everything happens according to reason. And, so, you ju, all you, all you can do is accept what is as what is and what will always be. The only thing you can change is your attitude about it. So, buck up, uh, uh, (Take whatever comes.) take, take whatever comes and rea, reason will do it all over again. And, so, get used to it. And, so, it's, it always surprises me when, when I hear church members say, Ah, everything happens for a reason. What they, what they are intending to say, they're, they're, usually they're intending to find some kind of way to make sense of or make meaning out of a bad situation. But they don't realize they're, they're, they're, they're actually, uh, uh, reproducing a stoic, uh, stoic cosmology from centuries ago that is, as Sherman said, it's utterly fatalistic. And the idea was, it helps you deal with suffering by simply bucking up and taking it.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 17:28

Yeah, and, you know, sometimes when people use this, they, they're meaning something different. They may say, Well, God can meet us wherever we find ourselves. Where, whatever situation we find ourselves in, God can meet us there and make something good out of it. That's very different, though, than, than the idea that everything has, everything that's happening, happens for a reason, a God given reason is the implied piece here. So, another of the, um, kind of understandings that feed into this idea of, uh, this whole idea of why, why are bad things happening to good people is actually come, is a theology, not the theology, but a theology from the Old Testament, which is called retribution theology. And in this one, um, it's, again, it's so apparent in the presupposition of the question of why do bad things happen to good people. So, here what it is, retribution theology says, If you do good, you get good. And if you do bad, you get bad. And if bad things are happening to you, well, you must have done something bad. Yes, exactly. Shame on you. And, and if you can't figure out what it is that you've done bad, well, then you're not going deep enough. You know, you're not, and it's, so, this is all based on goodness and badness. Again, though, who gets to measure that? Um, and, so, but again, it's assuming that we have control over what will happen in our lives. Again, this, this, uh, moral calculus is what there, is the basis there. And you'll find this in various places in the Old Testament and New Testament, um, but, um, it's only one of the theologies that you'll find. And you'll find some places that argue very vigorously against this. The book of Job, for instance, um, this is all about answering this question of why do bad things happen to good people? And, uh, yeah, they kind of trash it there, too. But this, this doesn't actually, this doesn't measure up to the God that we know.

Tony Chvala-Smith 19:45

So, I, I think it's important to understand that in the Hebrew Bible, there's a context behind this and that is that in the Hebrew Bible for most of it, until you get to the very latest book, which is Daniel, there's no concept of life after death, no concept of a, of a future writing of things, no concept of future rewards and punishments, whatever that means. In the Hebrew Bible, it's all about this life. What, you know, everybody goes to the same place when they die. Sheole, which is the, the abode of the dead, all of them, good, bad and ugly. Everybody's there. And, uh, and, and, so, (They all fade away over time.

That's what happens.) Yeah, your, your shadow just fades. Yeah. And, so, um, with, with the Hebrew Bible's strong sense of divine justice, how, how, where does that justice get worked out? Well, it must get worked out in this life, this theology holds. And, so, thus, this idea of, of (. . .) and so on, and so forth. And, yeah.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 20:42

But there's two dangers to it, a huge dangers, really, and that is to say that if someone's having a hard time in their life, they deserve it. Um, they must have done something wrong and so they deserve. So, we hear this a lot, you know, we hear of it with, with poor people or we hear of it when people are talking about the homeless. Well, you know, they just need to get a job and pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. And, so, it's implying that they deserve what they got. On the other hand, another danger on the other side is, well, then you start lifting up rich people, even if they got rich by doing bad things, like abusing others, taking of, taking advantage of their workers, of destroying the, the creation. Um, but because they're being blessed, they, because they're rich and famous and things, then, uh, all the exterior things would say, Well, God favors them over everybody else. And look, it's, they have all these things. So, if you're getting good then you must be good in God's eyes. And then, of course, that, um, can give people who have, already have wealth and power, um, even more wealth and power and the admiration of religious people, even though, um, they may be, their intentions may be very evil and bad. Say, you know, maybe some politicians that we've heard of, at some point, that have used, uh, this kind of idea to say, Well, God is obviously blessing me.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 20:57

Yeah. By the way, uh, Jesus, who was Jewish, knew that, knew of this theology and he critiqued it at least a couple places in the gospels. So, in the Gospel of John, the story about the man who was born blind, the disciples said, Who sinned, this man or his parents? And Jesus's first response to them is neither. And then there's a story in Luke where Jesus says, uh, you know, that, you know, that incident in Siloam, where a tower fell and killed a bunch of people? Did it, did that happen because they worse sinners than everybody else? No. So, so Jesus Himself, re, rejected this. Uh, in the spirit of the author of the book of Job, Jesus re, rejected this, this kind of a, a, you know, if you do good, you get good, if you do bad, blah, blah, blah. And, and, in fact, uh, Jesus says of God, uh, the, he makes the sun shine on the just and the unjust, which is a kind of a categorical critique of the whole idea that there's a moral calculus in the universe.

Carla Long 23:23

And there's even more to it than that even. Like, I'm, I would never consider myself wealthy, but I'm wealthier than most of the people in the world, probably. And, so, am I in the middle good. And the celebrities and millionaires, are they extra good? And, you know, like, so, I, I mean, are there levels of goodness in here? So, like, it gets really complicated really quickly?

Tony Chvala-Smith 23:48

Yes, it does. Which is why, which is why the simp, the simp, simplism of this kind of a theory just does not hold up to reality, which is what, which is what the author of the, the final author of the book of Job was trying to point out.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:02

So, these two that we've already just described, everything happens for a purpose and the re, the theology of retribution--if you do good, you get good, if you do bad, you get bad. Um, they have some things in common. And, basically, both are saying that whatever happens is somehow God's doing and, but there's a different tone with each of them. The first one, everything happens for a reason, um, is often said for people to, to distance themselves from someone else's suffering. Um, it's a, it's an easy step back, and an assurance that if that, and then we don't have to get involved. We don't have to help the sufferer. So, it's kind of more of an observation. Well, everything happens for a reason. Just hang on long enough something, you know, something good might happen. Well, but the theology of retribution, if someone is claiming that, um, kind of diagnosing the situation by saying, Well, you know, you do good, you get good. That's, uh, a difference here is that the person using that to describe the, the problem is putting themselves in a higher place. I know God's will for you. And if you're suffering right now, I can judge you because you've obviously done something bad. And, so, this one actually puts the, the speaker, the diagnoser, the so called friend or support, in, uh, this godlike role, this godlike position, where they know more than the one who is suffering and they can speak for God in the other's life, and then that's dangerous. That's, that kind of destroys the idea of equality in Christ. So, um, so, that's one of the ways in which, uh, those are, are similar. Uh, the other thing that they have in common, another similarity between these two, is that both pretend that there is only one determining causality in the world, that God is the only power at work in the world. And, so, anything that happens somehow is intended by God. So, some of the, some of the people, probably most of the people who use either of these, um, descriptions for why they're, why good people suffer, um, they probably believe in science or benefit from it. They, um, probably understand a little bit about weather patterns and how, how storms happen. They might even take vaccines or wear masks, um, because they understand that disease doesn't come because you're bad or you're good. It comes being passed along by a virus or germ or, you know, whatever. Um, so, on one level, they understand that there are these other causalities, there are causalities in nature, there are, um, um, some of the, the big tragic natural events that happen, that those affect things-- mudslides and storms and hurricanes and all of those things-- those can bring suffering to people. They recognize that that's another causality another, um, power source that's working, they know, they understand that disease can be something that can cause suffering, but they're still choosing to assume that only, that there's really only God that determines how things are going to come out. And, so, I think that's another thing to recognize, is they're, they're not acknowledging that in our individual lives, uh, there's a lot of sources, a lot of determining causalities. There's, you know, our cultural upbringing. There's the environment that we are exposed to. There is what's happening, um, in, in, in science and, and in the natural world, that these are all causalities, um, as well. Governments, uh, and the power that they have over people is a causality that can, you know, think about Flint in the lead in the water. These are, this is causing terrible suffering, um, because there's this other causality that is also affecting that. And, so, um, both of these ways of understanding, uh, are ignoring the, the reality that there are many causes for suffering and they're trying to say, Well, God has it all under control. And, you know, and, and they're ignoring that fact that they, they do recognize these other things.

Tony Chvala-Smith 29:07

And, and there's, eh, there are some kinds of causalities we have control over, right? Uh, bad, bad political decisions that yield suffering for groups of people, we, we do have control over who we vote for

and what kinds of policies we stand for, and so on. Um, we have some control over, uh, pollution and degradation of the environment. And, um, we have, we have, uh, I mean, there, there's so, there, there's so many area, causality is really complicated. And reducing causality to single causality that God's causing everything, uh, is, is not even accurate to the, the Bible as a whole. It's certainly not accurate to the best of Christian theology and it doesn't even fit our experience very well. It's, uh, once again, a simple, safe way to, to feel like you've got things under control. Um, when, in fact, uh, even medieval theologians like Thomas Aquinas understood that there are multiple levels of causality, you know, that, in a sense, God is the ultimate cause of the universe. But then there are secondary levels of causality that function, uh. God, God, God created the world in which there are other levels of causality that can function. That's, that's the precondition of, of freedom and development. And, so, so, um, reducing, reducing things to single causality, ie a divine cause, uh, actually complicates the picture morally a lot. And also then disempowers human beings from changing causes we could change. (Exactly.)

Carla Long 30:43

And I think that right there is, the, the last thing you said is a really important point because it actually takes away humans power, right? Like, we want to be in control. We want to know that this equals this, but that makes us powerless, that we don't get to, that we don't, actually we're not being in control of anything. So, that right, there is a reason for not to believe in that singular causality that God is making everything happen.

Tony Chvala-Smith 31:08

Yeah, it's a different thing to say all together, that God is present as the ground of all things, in the midst of all things, God is always present. Uh, that's a different thing, uh, than to see God as kind of a cosmic puppet master who is orchestrating, uh, whether you found a parking place or not, and or, you know, or, or who's getting COVID or what, you know, and that's, that's simply, uh, everybody would hate a, a, a person who was like that. (A micromanager.)

Tony Chvala-Smith 31:40

Right. And, so, and, so, theoretically, we're supposed to love God, uh, and love neighbor. But when you have, uh, conceptions of God like this, it's pretty hard to, to, it's actually hard to do both then, right? So,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 31:53

You might fear God, but you're probably not going to love God. (Yeah.) So, um, and then another, the third of these things that we would identify as being, uh, explanations that go along with the question, you know, why do bad things happen to good people, is the, is the suggestion, the solution, uh, well, you're being tested. And, you know, this is, this, um, this, that whatever struggle you're having is a test to, it's a, it's a divinely given test to see if you au, if, if your faith is good. You know, whether or not you have enough faith or to help you grow faith. Yeah, Carla.

Carla Long 32:35

This is just, I just want to make a really fast statement and say, this idea is rampant in Utah. Like, we, we hear this all the time in Utah about God testing your faith. And it just, and my heart just shrivels every time I hear it. So, please continue. This is really important for me to hear. (Yeah.)

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 32:52

Well, again, you have to ask the question, What kind of God does this make God, you know? Is God a, a schoolmarm with a ruler who wants to smack your hands when you get a wrong answer? Uh, is, is that, is that the kind of growth that, that this, this kind of a God wants is one that's based on fear? Um, so, you know, this whole idea of that anything bad that's happening to you is a test, it's still assuming that God is the primary causality, um, and that you have to be good enough, you have to have passed the test, to not have any more struggles. So, it's still feeding into some of the same things as the other two approaches do.

Tony Chvala-Smith 33:42

Yeah, so the, the idea here is that, that God, God is somehow trying to test us to see what we're made of, as if God doesn't already know what we're made of. And, and, and, you know, on, on that score, uh, God doesn't need to lead Tony to a pizza buffet to see how much pizza Tony will actually eat. God already knows that Tony will eat 8, 10, 12 pieces when he goes to a pizza. (. . .) Why does, why does God need, need to figure that out? Right? So, um, and by the way, in the New Testament in the book of James in chapter one, there's a cool statement that, that God does not test or tempt anyone. Test, tempt in Greek is one word, so, it can be translated either way. God does not test or tempt anyone. We're tempted or tested by our own desires, is what the book of James says, which I think is really cool. It's, like, that is so, that is so existentially true. Uh, uh, God's not testing me at the pizza buffet. I am testing me at the pizza buffet. And I'm here to tell you, Carla, I will fail every time.

Carla Long 34:43

Tony, don't think I haven't seen it for myself.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 34:48

So, this is one of those places again, where there may be a positive idea here, um, that this, that in some ways, there, there may be this idea of testing going on in our lives, but not that God is testing us, but that life is testing us. And God is willing to be with us to help us grow, to help, I mean that's completely different. It's just the (, , ,) changing of a couple of words. And sometimes that's what people may mean. But, um, it gets turned into this conniving God who's trying to make you stumble so that, that you can be judged or that you can, you know, or so that, that more bad things can happen to you, or maybe you'll just get it right, um, either by effort or by accident, and then somehow, then you're better with God than you were before. So, again, this is what a kind of god is this. And, and ag, again, you know, all of us have tests in our lives. Um, sometimes they're the ones we put ourselves through in the pizza buffet. Uh, sometimes they're the struggles of growth in relationships, and, and, and just, um, interaction with people and the world. And, and we can talk about testing as saying, When life tests us, God asks us to invite God to be with us and God can help us, uh, grow from it, heal from it, uh, walk away from it. Um, so, that's a completely different way of looking at it. Um, and not that God made these tests so that, so that, you know, will fall in the ditch. Um, (Yeah.) so, you know, people who may talk about tests may also think of God as being gracious and invitational and they mi. not, might not realize that these two ideas are not congruent, that, um, you know, if we believe that, that God is gracious and loving, then we see God is always inviting us to take the next step that we can, not having some, um, predetermined exam that we have to get right in order to go on to the next grade, but an

invitation, you know, a gracious God who's inviting us to discover with God the next, the next step in our, on our journey.

Tony Chvala-Smith 37:23

That reminds, that reminds me. Carla, uh, God, God is not like Tony feared by generations of students for the saying, Alright, take out a piece of paper and write your name in the upper right hand corner. (Pop quiz day.)

Carla Long 37:42

There's a lot of reasons that I am glad that God and Tony are not the same being. But there's some reasons I think God and Tony could be the same being.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 37:50

I'm not seeing it, but, alright, go ahead.

Tony Chvala-Smith 37:53

As the person who lives closest to me, and that, she's not gonna see that either. But, you know, the, the idea that God is testing you, again, it's about trying to control reality. Now look, uh, Thomas a Kempis, this great 14th century, uh, spiritual, spiritual writer, says in Imitation of Christ, occasions, things that happen, show us what we are. There's a great truth in that, right? The, thing, you know, things that happen each day, the, the big ones, the little ones, the painful ones, the not so painful ones. They constantly show us what we're, what we're made of. They can be a vehicle by which we grow. But the idea that God is somehow, uh, manipulating those, uh, to figure out, figure out something that God already knows about us is kind of a bizarre idea, really. Um, and the question is, you know, to come back to where Charmaine was few minutes ago, that in, in the occasions in the, in the events that happen, uh, to us, through us, with us, the, the real question is, How will we let the God of love and grace be present with us, in part, part of the experience as we work through it? That's a different question altogether.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 39:04

So, we've kind of gone through those three very common, uh, ways of trying to understand why good things, uh, bad things happen to good people. And we've also kind of looked behind the question itself to see what some of the presuppositions are. But now we want to give you some tools. And, so, um, these are called theodicies. And a theodicy is an explanation of where does suffering come from and where is God in it? Or?

Tony Chvala-Smith 39:37

Or how, how does one justify belief in God in the face of the miserable things that happen in life, in history, uh, for peoples, for cultures, for individuals. How, how does, how does one continue to believe in God, uh, in the midst of all of that. So, a theo, theodicy is an attempt to try and articulate these different pieces suffering, evil, the presence of God, God's love, justice and so on. How do we, how do we hold that all together, and, hey, nobody's got the right one here. But there are some different, different types of them that come up in, in, in theology that are worth, worth looking at and can give us some, some tools, as Charmaine mentioned, to, to think about stuff.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 40:19

And there's a bunch of them. We've, we've identified six, but we're only going to really cover three, and to give some, some explanation of how you can see suffering and God, um, and, and where they interchange, where they, where they're combined, where they can, where we can see, um, good possibilities in them.

Tony Chvala-Smith 40:41

So, the first one we'll look at very briefly is sometimes called the Irenaeun theodicy. It goes back to St. Irenaeus, a bishop in what is now France, Gaul in the Roman Empire, but a bishop in southern Gaul in the third, uh, second century in 200, uh, 1, from like 130 to, he lived from like 130 to 202. And, um, Ir, Irenaeus had a couple of challenges he was facing as a leader of Christian communities in southern France in that period. One was Roman persecution that was absolutely vicious. We have actual records of what the Romans did to, to Christians and it was, it was unbelievably barbaric. And, so, he's got that to deal with. Then he's got an in, an internal, an internal difficulty in the church which is people who've adopted this Gnostic, uh, mythology from the surrounding culture who are starting to say, Hey, you know, uh, the reason, the reason they're suffering at all is because there's matter, because there's a physical universe and the physical universe is a mistake and death will just release us from all this. And, and Irenaeus is like, No, God is the good creator of the good Earth. And, so, his, one of his ways of trying to deal with the question, uh, is he, he ar, he argues that, Well, uh, God, God created human beings imperfect and immature, uh, as children. Adam and Eve, he sees as children, so that there's the possibility of growth, right? God created, God created a, a, a universe in such a way that there would be the possibility of growth. And the only way that there can be growth is if there's the possibility of choices. God did not create evil, but, but the very fact of creating good, uh, creates a kind of a shadow side and we can, we can opt for the shadow side if we want to. Um, but choosing the good helps us grow morally. So, there's kind of a moral growth involved in it. That's, that was part of his, his way of articulating it.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 42:45

And even the, our bad choices can help us grow, uh, morally. And, so, God can work with the good and the bad things that happen in our lives, um, for growth.

Tony Chvala-Smith 42:59

So, for, for (. . .)

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 43:01

Again, you're not judged because you make mistakes. Um, it's inevitable. It's inevitable that you're going to make mistakes, but it becomes an arena where you can do some growing.

Tony Chvala-Smith 43:14

And for Irenaeus, Christ comes as the, he uses the term recapitulation. Christ sums up who humanity is supposed to be and, and, thereby, gives us both a model and the power through the life of the church and sacraments to, to make moral growth as we have to deal with the struggling and suffering that's around us and in us. And, so, basically Irenaeus is saying, The world is created in such a way that, that,

uh, what, what can happen is that persons can grow and mature. And the very idea of growth and maturity requires that there will be difficulty, struggle, challenges and so on. God didn't make them. It's just part of, it's just part of a universe in which there's freedom and the possibility of moral growth. So, one of, uh, a great, he's, he's gone now, but a great contemporary philosopher of religion who developed this idea was John Hick in his book *Evil and the God of Love*. That's a classic book on this topic. But he further developed the Irenaean theodicy, as he called it, uh, into a, a, a larger system. But the basic idea of Irenaeus is that, uh, in order, in order for there to be freedom of any kind, in or, in order for there to be moral growth of finite creatures, there has to be freedom. And that will imply that there are choices and possibilities that we, that, where we might choose against the good and that's, you know, obviously that doesn't, that doesn't resolve all kinds of major questions. It doesn't resolve, uh, for example, the existence of the Black Death as it was called in the 14th century in Europe, but, um, where, you know, a third of the population is just wiped out by a disease; doesn't solve that. But, but it, it does give some other ways to think about, uh, growing with God as one of the possibilities.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 44:56

Right. And it, and it doesn't do the other side of it, which is judge everybody else by saying, Well, if you died of the Black Death, then you obviously didn't have a proper faith. It, it doesn't go there at all. So, I think that's another way of saying what it isn't saying.

Tony Chvala-Smith 45:14

Yeah. Yeah. So, that's one. Another one, it doesn't have a name. Charmaine, and I coined a name for it. And we, we call it the Jesus narrative theodicy. And you'll find this in people like Migliore, Daniel Migliore, or Jürgen Moltmann, the German theologian, or Bradley Hanson, Lutheran theologian. Um, and you'll also find it, for example, in Julian of Norwich, right? And so, so the idea here is, um, the way, the way to approach the question of suffering, of, of the reality of suffering and the existence of evil is not to start with abstractions about God. Don't start with, God must, God is, God is omniscient. God is omnipotent. God is all loving. Therefore, X, Y and Z should happen or shouldn't happen. Those are all abstractions. No, this theodicy says, Actually, we start from the story, right? The story of Jesus. That's the center point of this theodicy and that's where we look to get a sense for who God is and how God is at work in the world and what, what life is about and how to deal with suffering and evil. And, so, um, basically, this, this theodicy will say no to any idea that God is somehow manipulating events so that, uh, suffering happens to people because that, that would, that would be contrary to the very thing that's revealed about the nature of God in the Jesus story, that God is love. God as the community of three persons, the triune God, is by definition, by, is essentially love. And, so, any attempt to deal with the question of suffering evil does not, that, that, that does not approach God in that, in that question as a God of love is ruled out of order because it doesn't square with the story.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 46:57

Right. And, so, you look at what happens in the story. What is it, if Jesus is the embodiment of God in the world, what is it that Jesus is doing? Jesus is trying to alleviate the suffering of people. And he's not giving them a questionnaire first, and saying, Okay, have you prayed three times today? And did you give an offering? And, you know, are you wearing your best clothes on Sunday? None of those things, um, in fact, think about the woman caught in adultery. Ha, you know, there's no, there's no, um, faith test. There's no righteousness test before Jesus touches people, heals people, tries to end their

suffering, tries to give them some other ways of understanding who they are and what their worth is. Um, so, uh, the, the example of Jesus is part of the theodicy that God is at work in the world trying to alleviate suffering through love, through care, through recognition of others' suffering.

Tony Chvala-Smith 48:04

And, so, one of the other things about this, this particular theodicy is that it imagines God as a, as a co-sufferer, a co-traveler with us, but also that God is, God accompanies creatures in their suffering. God, God is not remote from human suffering and for this theodicy where you see that as in the cross of Jesus, right? Jesus' cross as, as the, as the crucifixion of God incarnate shows that reveals that God, God is in the midst of suffering experiencing it, too.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 48:33

Is willing to join us in the suffering. Not, not sending it upon us, (Um hmm.) but joining us in the midst of it.

Tony Chvala-Smith 48:41

And so in this theodicy, we have a divine partner who is lover, beloved, and love, who is experiencing things with us, and also, at the same time, uh, calling us to serve the reign of God which is to, to create a different kind of world. And, so, wherever, this theodicy would say something like, Wherever p, wherever people are trying to work for a greater good for others, wherever people are trying to alleviate suffering, you can be sure that God the Spirit, is at work in that, in that particular instance. And, so, uh, it doesn't have, it doesn't have simple answers, but it at least gives the picture that we're not alone and abandoned in, in the misery and suffering that is the daily bread of so many people, right? So, I think, you know, that's, that's got something to offer as well, too. So, the third one we'll mention is somewhat related. It's, it's called the liberation theodicy. And it's, it's connected to different types of liberation theologies--uh, Latin American liberation theology, uh, black liberation theology, womanist liberation theology, which is African American women's perspectives on theology, (Feminist.) uh, femin, feminist theology, Mujerista theology, which is Latina, uh, Latina theology--in, in, in ev, in every case, people who have experienced constant structural and personal marginalization. In these cases, they experienced suffering upfront, up close and personal through racism, sexism, gender violence, and so on. Um, this is a theodicy that tries to think, from those perspectives. And, um, one of the things that, one of the things that this theodicy will say is, is that, uh, the experience of marginalized persons really has to be listened to if we're gonna' to talk about where is God in the midst of suffering because the suffering that marginalized people experience is almost always manufactured by other people. In other words, it's structurally created by systems of racism, systems of, of gender inequality, systems of in, economic inequality, sys, systems of exploitation, and, and so on. So, those are, those types of evil and suffering in the world have human causes. And, so, liberation theologians are gonna' say, We have to name and do something about those.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 51:11

Right. It's, in fact, they would say God is calling us to challenge and, uh, eliminate those sources of suffering. And God will empower us to do that. Uh, the Spirit will give us the strength, (Um hmm.) the words, the courage, to stand against governments or, um, popular culture, um, to, to make changes that will bring an end to certain kinds of suffering.

Tony Chvala-Smith 51:40

So, this, this type of theodicy is, is going to be highly critical of any, uh, pat answers that, that disempower people, like, everything happens for a reason, or God is testing you, and so on. Uh, th, this theodicy is gonna' say no to that. Uh, we can change that kind of suffering, right, that, and we should. And, and we will, we will find God as we try to change that, change those types of, of, suffering. Um, so, in this, in this theodicy, like in the Jesus narrative one, God actively chooses to be present, in this case with the poor and the oppressed and the marginalized of the world. That's where you will find God, and in, in working to alleviate their suffering, uh, we'll find redemption, right? Uh, so, so, um

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 51:40

And here, with that term redemption, redemption, then, is for the whole world, for whole systems. It's not just about me and my salvation. It's about this whole bigger sense that God is concerned about everyone, and the systems that shape our world and influence people. Um, so, this is about, uh, when we talk about the Kingdom of God, in Community of Christ, we're talking about, uh, societal redemption, societal salvation. And that's what liberation theology is pointing to as well, to, uh, the fa, that God cares about the whole world, um, being fully alive, being fully equal, being fully, uh, able to access the riches of life and the world.

Tony Chvala-Smith 53:20

And this, this, theodicy is skeptical of the theoretical kinds of theodicy. Well, if God is all powerful, all loving, how can suffering exist? One of those two, one of those things must not be true. But that's all theoretical, right? This theodicy says, Stop doing that. Uh, actually, actually go get engaged with, with the poor, the suffering, the marginalized, with people who are, who are being abused because of their gender, get involved there to change the circumstances in which they are, to, to alleviate their suffering. That's where you will find God and stop, stop just theor, theorizing, right? Get pastorally engage with them and stop theorizing. And, so, um, this theodicy would say no to any kinds of theologies which say, Just submit to the powers that be. There's a, there's an afterlife and things will be better afterwards. And, um, you know, injustice and oppression we can, we, we just have to put up with it and take it. This theodicy says, Actually, no, we don't. Um, on the basis of the (God cares.) Exodus, yeah, (God cares.) Right. God, in the, the Exodus story, God came down, the text says, uh, and saw the misery and then acted in and through Moses and, and to, to, to bring liberation and that's our charge, too. So, it's a different, it, it's, it's connected to the Jesus narrative theodic, theodicy, but in some different ways. And it's, it's a, it's an (More active.), right. Yeah. I was, I was going to that very word, (Sorry.) more, more activist in, in lots of ways, but so these are three different approaches to the question of suffering and evil that you can find in, in different Christian theologians. There's other ones, too.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 54:58

So, uh, um process, um, theodicy would say that, that God is either all, all loving, or, um, oop, sorry (. . .) that question.

Tony Chvala-Smith 55:14

God is all loving, and all good, but God is not all powerful and God's, God's, God is experiencing all this with us, but God is trying to figure it out as we go along, too.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 55:22

God can't do anything about it. So, (God's power is limited . . .) basically, you have to decide whether God is all loving or God is all powerful in, and that's a very brief, um, take on process theodicy, but there's other theodicies, too, like protest theodicy which, um, comes actually out of, um, the Holocaust, and, and also it's present in the Old Testament, but it's a theodicy that, um, kind of is open to the idea that you can protest God. You can, you can, um, (Yeah.), it's okay to say this suffering is, is unjust and to complain to God about that. Um, not to, to lose your faith, uh, but to say, God, where are you in this? Why have you been silent? Um, and, so, it, it empowers people to name the evil of some kinds of suffering and, and ask God, Where are you in this? Uh,

Tony Chvala-Smith 56:29

And, and on, this one, you can read, you can, you can catch a, a glimpse of this in Elie Wiesel's classic autobiographical story, Night. Um, a, the Jewish theologian Richard Rubinstein, his book, uh, Theology After Auschwitz, articulates a protest theodicy and there's no easy answers with this one. This one says, this one, that, says, God is. There is some infinite ground of being that is the source of all things. But you know what, it's pretty much up to us to, to decide what kind of future we're going to create. And we have to use our best resources to create a different future and we're not gonna' to hide behind religious cliches or, or

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 57:05

Or think somehow God is going to come and save us in the midst of suffering. Um,

Tony Chvala-Smith 57:09

There's no bailouts with, with this one (Right.). We, we have to create the, we have to create a, the, the most just future we can imagine. Um, I can think of a Jewish, a Jewish philosopher, theologian, Emil Fackenheim, who wrote a book called God's Presence in History. And there's a little bit of this type of theodicy in it, but one of his great sayings in that book is, Coming out of the Holocaust, here's God's new commandment to Jews, he says, Thou shalt not give Hitler any posthumous victories. Right? That's, that's, that's a, a, a, a, a perfect kind of statement for a protest theodicy. It's up to us to stop anti-semitism, racism and the violence connected to it. Um, and then one other that we didn't talk about was the Augustinian theodicy. It's, it's, uh, roughly from the same period, a little later than Irenaeus, but, um, the, the, the, the Augustinian theodicy has some interesting things in it. It basically says the whole, we have to look at the world, the whole system has been compromised by, by the in, injection of human sin and selfishness into the, into it. And, so, so there's no like storm free zones here. We, we've, we have mucked it all up. And, um, an, and so, you know, Augustine's doing this in the fourth, fifth century, doesn't have access to modern science and so on. So, he would see sickness and disease as part of the compromised system. I mean, he reads Genesis kind of literally, but he would see sickness, death, illness, struggle and suffering as part of a compromised world. Um, an, but, uh, one of the things he says is that God is present with us. And Au, Augustine has the, the idea that, that God, God will use even our, our, our worst stuff, God doesn't create our worst stuff, but God will use our worst, worst stuff and create different future out of it. Uh, the idea here is that, that God, God can draw straight with crooked lines is the, you know, our lines are always crooked. God is able to draw straight with them and God will create what God needs to create out of it in spite of what we have freely chosen to do. So,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 59:13

Kind of like God is, is ongoing of a creator, um, and, and using even our, our, our mess ups as, as new possibilities. It's, it's, it's that ever inviting God. It's the, the God who finds us, uh, when we wandered off the, the track and finds a way for us to make it through the b, brambles back to a road. (Yeah.) Um,

Carla Long 59:38

These are so fascinating, you two. Like, I don't know if people starting to listen to this podcast realize that they're gonna get this deep.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 59:47

Sorry. We kinda' get excited about this.

Carla Long 59:50

It's incredible. Like, the, these six different theodicies are, are so interesting, and some of them have some similarities, but they are so, so different, and different ways to view God just it, it's a little bit mind blowing. And I'm not sure that people just walking on the street would ever get there if, um,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:00:10

(. . .) all of these have in common is that this is a God who isn't looking for reasons to punish us. These are all about a God who is wanting to invite us to be part of change in the world, in our own lives. Um, moving towards goodness for all, rather than, you know, the, the idea that somehow we deserve to have comfort if we believe in God. It's like our little ticket is, if we believe in God, we'll, we'll get what we want. And that's, that's, you know, in lots of ways, that's a kind of a, a childish understanding of, um, of why you do things, you know, you, you know, you get an A on your, on your, on an exam and you get \$5, you know, whatever. Um, you know, and that's sometimes where we stay is we stay there with that idea of God, um, that, um, our own little world, our own little wants, are what God is about rather than, than, you know, God wanting to be with us and wanting us to want to be with God, um, within the struggles, outside of the struggles in it all. So, (Yeah.) I think it's just, we have, we have a really long, rich history within Christianity of understanding God in a very positive way of claiming a God who meets us in our suffering, doesn't punish us in, with the suffering or because we're not suffering good enough. Give us more of it. This, this is a, a God who understands what it means to be human and, um, doesn't punish us for being human, but understands what we need, which is that forgiveness, that freeing up from our, our guilt and, and that in, as an invitation to keep growing, to keep making room.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:02:19

And we also need to be freed from the illusion that there are simple formulas that we can latch on to that will just make everything better. There aren't simple formulas. Um, the simplest formula I can think of is love God, love neighbor, love self. And, yet, when we try to do that, we rec, recognize there's a lot of complexity in that. Um, but, you know, the ideas that everything happens for a reason, or you're being, you're being tested, you must have done something bad to deserve this, um, those lead in bad directions if you follow them through. They really, they really do. And we can do so much better in terms of how we deal with that real problem of human and ecological misery and devastation. And, so, we

have, there are other resources that can help us think better, speak better, act better for the well being of others, um, and the well being of creation.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:03:18

Yeah, and, you know, I, an, another thought came to mind is that one of the biggest problems with the, if you do good, you get good, if you do bad, you get bad, um, that means somebody gets to decide what the list is about what's good. And, once you have a list that you are worshipping, that you're focusing your life around in order to feel like you have control and will have a comfortable life, then you don't need God. God is out of the picture because you're interested in the list. And a lot of, um, a lot of churches, lots of denominations have a list. The, these are the good things you need to do in order to be good with God and to, to benefit from your relationship with God. Well, you know what? I, God wants us to benefit from a relationship with God. That's it. And, um, and besides, who made up the rules? Who, who said what's, what's good? Um, you know, often what's good is sexist, or, you know, hetero, uh, what's the term?

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:04:33

Hetero normative (Normative.) Right. Yeah.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:04:34

You know, this somebody made up this list that said it, you have to be this, this and this to be, uh, loved by God. And then, and then you're not experiencing God. You're trying to prove yourself to a list and that makes distance between us and God.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:04:50

And, and behind all that is, in my view, uh, the rhetoric of control. (Hierarchical control.) We, we want, we want a formula and a list so we can control you. And in the political realm, when you have a formula and a list and control, it's called fascism. Right? In the religious realm, you can call it fundamentalism. You can call it authoritarianism. If it's the, it's same thing only wearing its Sunday church clothes, it's still the rhetoric of control, trying to dominate, and, and squelch others. And to, uh, make sure that everybody looks the same way and acts the same way. Uh,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:05:38

And raising yourself up into this role of God.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:05:42

It ac, actually has nothing to do with the Bible and has nothing to do with, has nothing to do with, with the message of Jesus. It really has everything to do with people's fear and desire to control others.

Carla Long 1:05:54

That actually reminds me of a meme that I saw. (Oh, what was it?) Well, it's something like everyone's an atheist until you clog your friend's toilet. (Laughter.) (Plunger God, right?) Everyone wants control until there's something really crappy that you can't control. I feel, I feel deeply theological saying that right now. I feel like I really hit the mark.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:06:33

I think you, that's something you would write on the bottom of a, of a 10 question quiz. You would throw it in to see if I can get, give you extra credit for it.

Carla Long 1:06:42

That's absolutely true. (I probably would.) I would deserve it. I'm just saying, Well, this has been just a fascinating discussion. Um, I, I know there's lots more to say about this. But we're almost out of time. We're, we've, you've just gone so deep into this. It's just been wonderful. So, I'm gonna' to ask you for some closing thoughts on, why do bad things happen to good people? If you have any closing thoughts, um, I'd love to hear them.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:07:11

My, my first one is, um, reframe the question. That's, that's not the question God cares about.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:07:22

And the only thing I would add to that is, uh, I'm, I'm obviously going to quote the Bible here, I'm gonna' quote Romans 8, Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Carla Long 1:07:33

That's beautiful and a much, much better way to end the podcast than my meme. Although, I hope that what people take away from this podcast is not just my meme.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:07:42

(. . .) though we're okay with that.

Carla Long 1:07:47

No, we're not. Thank you again, Tony and Charmaine. It's always a pleasure to talk to you and to learn from you yet again. You're just fantastic.

Josh Mangelson 1:08:02

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