

Josh Mangelson 00:17

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

Carla Long 00:33

Hello, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla long and today you're listening to percolating on faith and I'm back here with Charmaine and Tonisha. Vela Smith, two of my favorite people on the planet. Hello, Tony. Hello, Charmaine.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 00:46

Hi, Carla. Good to be with you

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 00:48

like Carla, always a pleasure.

Carla Long 00:51

Today, we're going to talk about something that sounds super duper, duper smart. And after you listen to this, you're going to feel super duper smart, because you're going to be able to say a lot of words with a lot of syllables. And I hope that when you talk to your families and friends about it, you can say I heard this on Project Zion. Today we're going to talk more about the Odysseys which we actually talked about in a previous podcast, but we're gonna go a little bit deeper into it. And I think that that's where we're kind of going to start off at like, What the heck is a theodicy? Tony and Charmaine?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:22

Good? Good? That's a really good question. And you may have heard the term tossed around in different settings. But we're gonna give you just kind of a general definition of the theodicy with the recognition that different theodicies is different theological backgrounds for different theocracies will frame the question differently. But the but you this will give you the main idea. So there's really theodicy in general, is about is the question, what is the relationship between God and the suffering and evil that we find in the world? So that's the basic thing. And this is something that almost everybody deals with, at some point. If it's their own personal situation, or setting of suffering, or of pain, or of evil in their life? Where is God in this? How does? How is it that God would allow this to happen at all in, in creation? But what but also more specifically, how, where is God? If I'm suffering? So that's kind of the general question that lots of people deal with, personally. But it's also a question that we deal with when, when we're looking at situations in the world, when we're seeing terrible violence of one nation, invading another nation, you know, when one person just determines that a whole group of people are not valuable, and the suffering that happens that so this is a question that comes up all the time in different ways. And so the Odyssey is a way to explore that whole question.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 03:11

And I suppose we could say that this is a question that comes up primarily for people who are theists, that is people who believe in an ultimate power or person, God, who is personal in some way, that's theism? And so if, if one if one does not believe in the existence of an ultimate power, ultimate person, Gods when it's, they will still have to deal with suffering and evil, but it's a different kind of problem there.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 03:41

Yeah. Because you're not trying to figure out well, where is God in it? Or how would a God let this happen in the first place? So as we look at this question of what is the relationship between God and the suffering and evil found in the world, we kind of think of it as four prongs. Think of it as a fork. There's four different topics that really as you start to unravel it, that are all really important, pertinent to this, and one of them is, why are suffering and evil, so present in human experience and in the world? So that's the kind of the basic Why is it even there? The second is, why did God create a world in which suffering and evil are possible? So this is starting to tie in the god part? And then, depending on how you answer that last question, then the third prong is, what does this say about the nature of God? What kind of god is this that we're talking about? And then the fourth prong is, why doesn't God protect us from evil and suffering? or similar question is, are Where is God when we are suffering?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 04:53

So So theodicy would be a particular theological way of dealing with one or more of those questions? That's right. So theodicy isn't the whole of theology. It's an it's a part of it, but it's, you know, it's going to be, how will I construe those different questions and respond to them and try to make sense of them?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 05:11

So we're going to be doing this series, I think of five different theocracies and so that we can kind of help you dig into some of the implications of how do you think about these questions that we just mentioned? And how does it then affect how you live in the world? So we'll be looking at some of the implications of different theocracies as well.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 05:35

So yes, Carla, there'll be lots of mono syllabic words in this podcast, but we we hope we will explain them as we use them, and maybe find you know, simpler words where we can, I think I should have said poly poly polysyllabic words, we'll look for monosyllabic words as we go to, to help. So like, Oh, darn this first.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 06:02

Which is where this starts, really.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 06:04

There's kind of its we'll call the trendy way of approaching theodicy, though it's been around since the 1700s, connected back to the German philosopher Livens. But this is this is Ben to pose the question in a very specific way, kind of like this, if God is.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 06:22

So this is just an example of, of a theodicy that people may have heard about. But it's only one. And it's one that we think it is full of presuppositions. So this is, so we don't use that as our primary definition or question about theodicy.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 06:40

So that the way that the question gets posed here is if God is all powerful, and all loving, how could an all loving, all powerful God allow suffering and evil? It must mean that God is either not all powerful, or not all loving? So that's, that's kind of a classic way that the dilemma? Well, this is treated as a dilemma and and put put forward as a question. But we show me I kind of think that the very form of the question is laden with hidden presuppositions and assumptions, right, there's a whole bunch of things built into the question. And, you know, in a contemporary setting, we've seen this again, and again, and again, this, this old question gets launched at people in a kind of gotcha, way. Right? So like, like, see, you can't answer that. But so we're, that's why we started with a different definition, right, a more a more neutral definition, to the theology question.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 07:31

Because this one is assuming that if that, if God is all loving, that God are all powerful, and all loving, God wouldn't allow there to be any suffering. And that's, parents know that they can't, they can't keep their children from all kinds of suffering. And they may probably, and pain II, they probably shouldn't, actually. Because they need that in order to grow and build muscles, and you know, all those kinds of things.

Carla Long 08:04

So if you want to stagnate their lives, then you want to keep them all. I mean, if you want to do that,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 08:11

I mean, even the body's growing it, you know, there's pain, there's growth, there's growing pains, for children, and so anyhow. So that's one of the presuppositions in that definition is that if God really loved us, and was powerful enough, God wouldn't let us suffer?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 08:33

And also wouldn't let us suffer? Yeah, and another theological assumption that's built into the way that question is framed when it's when it's framed like that, is that when we use language for God, like power and love, it means exactly for God what it means for human beings, which is a mistake. And it was the great medieval theologian, Thomas Aquinas, who said, No, that, that that approach to theological language doesn't work. Because when we say that God is wise, what we're doing is creating an analogy, we have experience with human wisdom. And what we're saying is that God, God's wisdom is like that, but infinitely more and so so the best we can do is have an analogy or a metaphor, but but the way the question is posed, assumes that power love what it would mean for us power, it should mean exactly the same thing for God. And so that words, those are some of the other one of the assumptions that's built into that the way the question is framed there.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 09:28

But this is this is a question that comes from a particular theodicy, and we'll be dealing with that one later on in in our series, because it is, it is a valid question. It's just that there's a lot of presuppositions and if you don't unpack them, then you get kind of stuck, you can get stuck, but that's why we started with a more general definition of what is the relationship between God and the suffering and evil that we find in the world or that finds us.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 09:59

And so the first off, for the first first one we're going to do is we're going to focus on this sometimes called the Irenaeus theodicy, or sometimes it's called the person making the theodicy. And let me just say that the Bible is a library of books, both Old and New Testament has different ways of dealing with this question, but there's nothing in the Bible that's like a fully worked out theodicy. And and so the Bible gives different sorts of fragments and pieces and, and questions and there's arguments in the Bible about the nature of this. No, no final answer. And so theologians over the centuries who have had to deal with the questions, we've, we've framed it, they in their settings, for whatever reasons, we've had to try and figure out or how will I use scripture tradition, experience and reason to, to give some sort of tentative answer to this. And so the first one we're going to do is called Irenaeus. And it's called that because it's named after a man named Irenaeus. So Irenaeus lived in the second century.

Carla Long 11:03

This is one of those polysyllabic words, I'm really excited to say every time I say you're an alien, I think I feel really smart when I say that. I just want you to know. And also, you just went right over live minutes. I mean, he's the father of calculus. Him and Newton are the father of calculus. Of course, I'm excited about him continue. Well, that's all I needed to say.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 11:21

I didn't know that he's a he's one of the fathers of calculus?

Carla Long 11:24

Yeah, he came up with it at the same time as Newton did and Newton is out. So they came up with this exact same time in like different places.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 11:31

Well, no wonder he was interested in suffering because he created forms that make people suffer.

Carla Long 11:37

Excellent point. Excellent point. Okay, please continue on with Aaron and theocracies,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 11:42

by the way Irenaeus is it's a Greek name, and it means something like peaceful one. So So that's even know more about that. That name now, Carlos. So so um, Irenaeus lived in the second century, he was a bishop in the Christian church in southern France, which was called Gaul. And when I say Bishop, second century church, do not think about building structures, people in robes and so on. That's just not yet. He's, he's the overseer of the Christian communities that are in since Southern France. And his his

contexts really shapes what he sees in terms of how he tries to interpret this, this question of Where's where's God in the midst of suffering and evil?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 12:27

And one of the things I think that's helpful is, first of all, to say, the church is not even 100 years. Well, when he's born, even as he is not a 130 is not even really 100, just about 100 years old. So it's still it's still forming some of its first theologies, and, you know, Iran as never wrote a theodicy. But different people have taken some of the things from his writings and kind of use those as building blocks to build to to try to describe these insights that Irenaeus had about God's relationship to suffering and evil. And so one of the people in

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 13:15

today's 20th century 20th century Yeah,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 13:20

is John Hick, who took the Iranian theodicy and really created something that fit well, in his time in some situations, and created a theodicy. So I just wanted to put that out there. First, you know, this is happening. Irenaeus is very early in the church, and he's writing down, he's having to deal with all kinds of little fires, he's having to put out and develop language to help these brand new Christians understand what it what is this? What are we saying about this? God? What are we saying about Jesus? And how does it affect how we understand our suffering and pain, but he's also having to deal with particular other religious ideas in that time. And so that's where Tony's gonna go, sorry. Yeah, I just wanted to background before he went into his background.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 14:15

So what what prompted him to think about this, this issue is he's got two crises he's dealing with, right. The one crisis is a crisis of persecution. So the Roman Empire in Gaul began locally, at least in Gaul begin a really harsh repression of Christians. There are we have actually martyr stories now and what the Romans did to Christians was absolutely abysmally horrible. So there's a lot of brutal suffering among people in his congregations. So that's one part of the crisis he's having to deal with. And of course, if you're, if you're a if you're a Gentile who's just signed up for this new religion, it's built around Jesus, the Jesus the peace of the peacemaker, and you're being put on a rack and brutally tortured, you're kind of wondering. Alright, so what did I sign up for?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 15:04

Why am I doing this? What kind of God is this? Yeah,

Carla Long 15:07

My mom would be very mad at me if I signed up for that my mom would be like you're getting out of that, honey, you're getting out.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 15:13

Exactly. So that's he's got that to deal with. But then he has an internal crisis in the church that's caused by the presence of a widespread philosophy that takes different forms, but the philosophy is

called Gnosticism. And not Gnostic Gnostic ideas focused around something like an answer to the problem of suffering. And the Gnostic answers the problem of suffering is that well, the material universe is a mistake. Right? It's an ad, yeah, physical physicality, our body, flesh, blood bodies, all that that's, that's a mistake that was not created by a good deity that was created by a bad deity. Right. And so we're, we're stuck in this cosmic mistake. And what the, what the Gnostics then said is, the solution of the problem of suffering is not here, this solution to the problem of suffering is that you, you have to, you have to learn the right stuff, get the right knowledge, and that will set free, the real you the real spiritual you, and that will get you ready to make an escape plan from this physical world, and, and at death, in some Gnostic systems. But already, other Gnostic systems in this life, your inner Spirit already experienced as a kind of unification with this, this other realm, and that frees you from this physical realm, which is cosmic mudhole.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 16:48

So it really makes this sharp distinction between the spiritual or the head knowledge kinds of things, special knowledge, and our physical bodies and our responsibility to each other and the world. It's, that's all bad, we don't really need to worry about those things, only about these right ideas.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 17:06

And Irenaeus as a Christian thinker, says, "That's not acceptable, actually." Right? Because within Christian Christian, that's going to be unacceptable, because because as a Christian, who reads the Old Testament in Greek, and has there's no New Testament canon yet, but he has a number of books that will become part of the New Testament. He says, the physic everything, the physical universe, everything is the good creation of a good God, there's not two Gods a good one and a bad one. And physicality is not wrong or bad, it's part of it is the good creation. And so he's going to push back on that. And so, but still, he has to come up with a different way of talking about so why, why then, does this life here in this presumably good creation? Why is it often so hard and miserable and even painful? In relation to the people who are being tortured and murdered by the Romans? So he doesn't he doesn't create a complete theodicy, but in his masterwork, which is called against heresies. Love a title, actually, the Greek title is much longer than Latin titles much longer, but against heresies, which is five books long, it's quite long. He, in different places, articulates potential answers, but kind of building blocks, but not not, he doesn't in one place, like pull it all together and say, Alright, here's the answer. And I want to say that generally, over the centuries, Christian theology has been very, very careful, cautious about saying, Hey, we now have the answer to the problem of suffering. So I think that we'll come back to that a little bit, and a little bit later, but, but what he has is different. He's a pastoral theologian, he's trying to help people who are struggling and suffering, make sense of their belief in a good God, a good creation, and what kind of world is this then? And how does God fit into it? So he has these different building blocks. And so we, what we've done is, is through a variety of sources, we've got kind of a summary of key points in your analysis theodicy.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:16

So one of them and we think this one's quite quite important, is that God originally and intentionally created human beings, as imperfect and mature, think children. You know, we don't start as fully grown and fully mature individuals, and some people never get there, but just just mentioning that, but this idea that all of us whether, as we as we enter into this relationship with God, are imperfect and

immature. And so this builds the possibility and actually the necessity of growth into the world and into human life from the start so that the nature of humanity is, is growing is a kind of innocence and having to, to learn new things so that they can survive in the world. So that's the that's really an important thing about this The Odyssey is how do they see human human beings, and they see them not as bad and willful children trying to, you know, drive their parents nuts, but also that that would be a different to this one is that these are children who are trying to find their way and trying to grow into maturity.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 20:39

And so what you're going to hear is that grow growing and maturing is a real important theme in an Iranian theodicy. And part of it and other contextual pieces that Irenaeus, as a Greek person, a Greek thinker, who's actually a bishop in a Latin part of the world. But as a Greek thinker, he's inherited this long, long, long Greek tradition of high their education, we get the word pedagogical from it, but Paideia was this, this, this deep Greek idea that we have to educate and train the person through many steps, you know, think think training for the Olympics, kind of like that. So set, the next point then in an Iranian theocracy is that Adam and Eve, now let me pause here, this is a second century person, in essence, so he would have thought of Adam and Eve as real historical persons. So we just have to let him be in the second century, right. But for him, Adam and Eve were children. And thus, their sin was an act of weakness and vulnerability. It wasn't like high handed rebellion against God. It's, it's, it was the mistakes that children would make.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 21:50

Like there's a shiny object, let's taste it and see if it's good or not.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 21:55

So, so I think it's really important to note that Aaron asked didn't disregard the idea of sin at all. But he didn't interpret Adam and Eve sin as a fall in the sense that it infected everything with kind of like a virus of universal guilt. That's going to be a slightly later conception, that we will deal with when we get to an Augustinian theodicy, but here with Irenaeus he doesn't think of the fall in those terms, it's Adam and Eve, had some grown up to do and they made they made, they made the kind of mistake a child makes, when you say, do not touch the cookies. all they hear is cookies, and touch it very selective years, you know, they are so. So that's, that's another point in Irenaeus conception of the relationship between God and the evil and suffering of the world.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 22:51

And so therefore, the purpose of life is that finite, immature creatures learn to participate in their own gradual, moral and spiritual growth. So it's learning, it's kind of we're learning as we seek God. And we and what we're learning is what's morally good, what's good for relationships, what's good for the world, and we also learn how to avoid evil or bad choices. So it's kind of the that's the purpose of life is to be in this ongoing growth. trajectory.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 23:33

Yeah, so this is that educational feel to it all, you know. So the next point that would be that for in Irenaeus theodicy what's what's needed in order to grow morally and spiritually, is an environment in

which there's the possibility of choosing between good and evil, right, there has to be real possibilities there. Otherwise, there's no learning is going to take place.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 23:55

There's not any real choosing either. People don't have to exercise their thought processes and choosing if there isn't good and, and evil choices,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:05

right? So if, if, if eating, if eating 50 brownies at once never did anything to me, I would never learn that it wasn't good to eat 50 brownies at once, right? So but that's not the universe we live in. And so for a year and anthos, because God's ended goal is that finite creatures learn to freely choose growth, towards towards moral perfection in relationship to God. But well, God is justified in creating a good but imperfect world.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:39

Right? It's can't blame God because they're suffering. That's not Yeah, that was necessary.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:44

God has created a world that's ideal, to to create moral growth in people. And so true freedom. That's a really important thing in both Greek theology and Uranus. True freedom entails the possibility of choosing that which either leads to a mistake, or to evil or to suffering so. So the the world, as it has been created contains the possibilities, that we may choose something other than the moral good with with consequences, but that's part of the learning trajectory for, for Iranians.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 25:21

Right and, and the possibilities for failure can cause them suffering for yourself or others, and can be the source of evil as well. So the fifth one is that this world is an environment that is conducive to growth, kind of like what Tony was just saying, where there, which includes experiences of good and evil, of joy and suffering, of success and failure, all of those things. And the idea being that there has to be some contrast, in order for people as finite creatures, to learn to recognize what's a better, what's a better thing, and what's the worst thing, if God only created the world with good happy choices, then we wouldn't grow in our understanding of what's better, and what's worse. And so, this world then provides real choices between evil and good. And it also produces the consequences that teach us things, you know, like, touching a hot, a hot burner will burn us, you know, and that's a consequence. And so existence then is filled with danger and challenge and risk, and with the possibility of suffering and evil, as well as that possibility and that need for growth. So all of this is permitted by God, it's not created to happen to you know, all the suffering is not created by God in any way. God is not trying to make us suffer. But God allows us and other people's choices to affect where we go with things.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 27:05

So a world in which freedom is real, for an Iranian theocracy, a world in which freedom is going to be real, and not just a facade has to be world in which there are multiple possibilities, some of them, not very good, right, so. So the next the next part of this, the sixth part is that the world is created in such a way that it includes the process of what later theologians following Irenaeus will, will call person making

right. So in other words, the formation of ever maturing creatures who directly participate in the process of growth into the likeness of God. So you're an atheist is trying to interpret the book of Genesis created an image and likeness of God. And so one of his interpretative strategies is that the likeness is what we're growing towards. Right? We're growing towards the likeness of God. And so we get to participate in that process in Irenaeus' his mind and later theologians have picked up on that. John Hicks in particular has picked up on that and developed it quite a bit more. But you know, this is Carla, this is why in classes, university classes, we we have tests and quizzes, and why don't you just take out a piece of paper and put your name at the top there's, this is an opportunity, this is an opportunity for you in terror to grow.

Carla Long 28:28

Just that you'd like to see the look of absolute and abject fear on our faces. I just thought that you enjoyed that. Oh, there's a different reason.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 28:38

We're trying to be person making. Yeah, that's it. That's it,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 28:41

we have created this classroom experience so that you will grow moral.

Carla Long 28:48

I don't know if a lot of people buy that. But I don't know.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 28:53

It's good to question that. So the last of our points, point seven, it's John Hick. So he's the one who developed and expanded this Irenaean Theodicy and kind of gave it some relevance in the 20th century and 21st century by saying that, only and I think this is important, "Only if all free creatures eventually come to that moral perfection. That is the image of God. Would God be justified in creating a world with the possibilities of suffering and evil." And so I don't know. I was reading it because I wanted to get all the words right. But there's this implication that what God is wanting is for all creation, to come into this ongoing relationship with God and growing into the likeness of God, all of creation, and that that's for Hick at least the primary justification for why God would allow suffering and evil is and with that, if there is then this emphasis need for a focus on eternal life. So it's obvious to anyone who's noticing that some bad people don't get very good. Some of them only seem to get more and more awful. And some, some good people who are trying to grow in their relationship with God get a certain place, but it may be evil are suffering may shorten their life or may make it very, very difficult for them to keep growing. And so there's this sense that there has to be an afterlife in order for this continual growing to continue to happen. And so Hick argues that eternal life is a necessary component, since so many people have limited opportunities in this life, or have tragic events that affect them, or evil choices, theirs or others have turned their life into such in such a direction that they can't, they can't hear that invitation to grow. And so there's there will there is and will be opportunity to learn and grow in the future in the future lives. And that that may include successive worlds, so different places into the future beyond this life. He's speculating there, but he's, he's trying to, he's trying to extend out from this if if God is a God of love, and God, but God is also concerned that we learn how to grow morally by free

choice choice, then hippies arguing that God would have created a, a situation in which there's ongoing possibilities for that. So. So that's kind of a quick overview of it. Irenaeus theodicy. I mean, we what we've done is we've condensed it. Hicks book alone evil and the God of love is a big, fat 400 page book, which is, which is really quite worth quite worth reading. But anyway, this is this is a perspective, right? This is a way that certain theological traditions have tried to deal with the problem of what's the relationship between God and the the bad things that have happened to me, to my family, to the people in our congregation, to people in our city? How do we, how do we hold all this together? How do we, how do we just make sense? And how do we justify our own belief in a God of love when these things are happening, and so, in Irenaeus has given kind of one, one approach to it, and, and the I, what we want to do next is we want to say, Okay, well, how, what does how does? How could this play out? Right? What What?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 32:58

Is this useful? Yeah,

Carla Long 32:59

That was my exact question? Like, I think it's really cool to understand those kinds of things in this hear those kinds of things, but like, how is this practical to my life? Like, how can I say the word Iranian, and some conversation and sound smart? And then let it be practical knowledge as well? So how does this affect my life, knowing all this?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 33:21

Right. So there's a couple of ways and one is the simple application. So, you know, when we find ourselves in the midst of suffering, and and or evil or loss or any of those things, we can say, okay, I don't have to be angry at God, I don't have to feel like somehow, I'm entitled to have an easy life. And if something bad has happened, and God has failed, or that I'm being punished, or whatever, so it's it on a personal level, it gives us some options to think about, why is it that I'm in the midst of suffering, or, or there's evil going on, that's affecting me. So that's the first part. But the second part, and this would be the place where you get to use the word Iranian more would be.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 34:04

Well like, how do you how do you preach this? Right? How, how might this in ministry, how would you use it? The concepts of an Iranian theology in preaching? And so I'll start by saying that we don't preach the theodicies. Right. Right, they, the pulpit is not a place where we lecture about different kinds of theocracies, at least per se, we don't do that. But, you know, because you're gonna have people sitting there in the congregation who are in the mid oh my gosh, they're gonna be dealing with immense pain or loss or struggle, horrible stuff. And so the pulpits not the public can't be the place for the theoretical theological elixir. That's, that's gonna fix it all. Just Just Just drink three drops of the CRC and you'll feel better. No, it's not. It's not what it's it's not it's not how we use this this aspect of theology but, but on the other hand, themes, themes from an Irenaeus theodicy could be helpful illustrations in a in a sermon on discipleship, right? Discipleship as a life that seeks spiritual growth and maturing Well, there's a lot of stuff from an Iranian theocracy that would be appropriate, right? That would say, here's, here's, here's how this fits in this setting.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 35:19

And it particularly when you're reading or using passages from the Gospels, where the disciples really like our kind of dance and don't get it most of the time. And it sounds like, Oh, okay. This is why Jesus could be patient with them some most of the time. Not always, but, but it would fit very well for that kind of an understanding of ourselves as disciples.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 35:43

And I think a big picture item here is that an Iranian theodicy conceives of God in a generous way. Right? And so that's really helpful in personal spirituality, in corporate spirituality in church life and preaching, how generous is the God you imagine, right? And so, Aaron, and theodicy, at least does that imagine Scott is really, really ultra generous and wanting every creature, even the most horribly wretched, to ultimately choose freely in some fashion, moral improvement and to become closer to the image of God. But now, um, you know what, let's say, here's another way you can, you can use an errand and theodicy and preaching, let's say, you have a specific lectionary text that's really well suited to this. And here's an example. This is Romans chapter five, one through five, which reads, therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ through whom we have attained access to this grace in which we stand. And we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us, right. That's the quote, let's assume that's a lectionary text. And it's electronic texts that, that the worship helps are built around and you can't invade this text, don't get to pick another one. This is the texture must preach on well. So an Iranian theodicy might be helpful for elucidating Paul's insights on suffering in this text mean, and you can go into Paul's own life, Paul had plenty of suffering. And yet he, through the Holy Spirit, through God, the Holy Spirit, is learning how to let the suffering become educational for him in some way. So there I mean, there depends on the text you have, but you can, you might find good ways to let an errand and theme, illustrate a text. I'm also a theme from this theodicy might illuminate some aspect of your own experience of suffering, whatever that is, and that could be shared in a testimony of some sort, that that may be an illustration in a sermon, you know, for example, something like, you know, this experience I went through was really painful, and in no sense, was it God's will. But through it, God helped me so I was able to learn this, this or this, that would be here and and in a sense, right, and so that, that could that could be a sensible and thoughtful way to use this. Now, we have to be aware that the Iranian theodicy, like all of them, has inherent weaknesses. So lots of theologians have noted that an Iranian theodicy does not vigorously call people to work in eradicating suffering in the world. Right? So are to fight against social injustice and evils that could lead to people experiencing pain and suffering. So there, there are limits to how far Iranian theodicy can go, how far it can take us there. There are things that can do and lots of things that can't do this one in particular, I mean, you'd want to be very careful using this one in different contexts. You This one could be treated as somehow minimizing like, massive, horrifying, evil, like the Holocaust. What I mean, that's, that's beyond learning stuff, right? Like, you know, I might, I can learn stuff from, you know, I can learn stuff from burning my finger on a hot stove. But I can think of nothing to be learned from Jewish children being burned in ovens. And so there's real limits to what this theodicy can do in terms of social and environmental good. It it Has it has a particular focus and in that particular focus, it works okay? But it's, you know, no theodicy is the good news.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 40:10

Right? These are Jesus, Jesus is the good news.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 40:14

The Odyssey is a construct, it's a way to try and say, I want to believe in God. At the same time, I want to be able to deal with the horrific evil I see going on in the world or around me, or the suffering I've had to deal with, right? So you just have to keep reminding yourself that theodicy is not the message of the church with the Odyssey is a particular way to deal with this real human problem suffering, while at the same time holding faith in God. Final thing with with an Iranian theodicy is that in Iran as himself in his his conception of the Trinity, and again, this is the second century so it's the turning Trinitarian doctrine is not worked out fully yet, but, but he thinks of the Sun S-O-N, or word Lagace, and the Spirit as the two hands of God. Right, so God, he thinks of God as a triad, Father, Son, Spirit, but his way of picturing it is that the Son is one hand and the Spirit is the other hand of God. And so I think there's some, some of that some of that could preach right? In a time in a time of struggle, what if we imagine God reaching out to hands to us to help us through it? Some simple way you could use your, an Iranian understanding of God in a situation of suffering and struggle.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 41:37

And a specific one, you know, if you're working with the idea of, of us being like children, is about a child learning to walk? And how do you do that, but you put your hands out, so that they can take them and so the idea of Jesus and the Holy Spirit as being God's hands, it's a really beautiful little image to think about our times when we fall or our times when, when we trip, or those times were just too tired to to move forward. So that's it. So really, some nice all those

Tony Chvala-Smith 42:14

times mentioned, have spoken my mind so so freely in the meeting. repercussions. Now the two hands are not reaching out to help me they're reaching out to you thinking Tony, oh,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 42:27

my goodness. So another, I think practical way that we can think about these theocracies is how do they pray? How do we let them guide us in our prayer? Or what might it look or feel like to let this theodicy be part of our prayer? So I just have a few like starter lines that might be part or the beginning or part of a prayer that comes that uses this Iranian theodicy as a starting point for knowing who God is and who we are. So here's, here's one. God, I know that you were with Jesus in His suffering, perhaps even when he could not feel you near. Please be with me, in my time of fear and suffering. And that's one of those parts of this theodicy is it points back to the fact that Jesus suffered. And so it's not that, that suffering is bad, necessarily, and that God is there with us. And so that that's where that one came from another god, you did not cause the evil or pain or suffering I'm experiencing. But please help me endure it. And to see how I can grow from it helped me not harden my heart, or learn hate, but instead, trust your goodness to expand in my reactions to it. Another in so many ways, God, I feel like a child, just beginning to learn who you are, and what you invite me to do or think, or believe in this life. And then you could go on from there. God, please help me use the situation to see people and the world more clearly. So that I can choose my steps more wisely in the future. Another I can see that my

decisions and mistakes are causing me and others great pain. Thank you, God for assuring me that like a loving parent, you have forgiven me and want me to learn a better way of living in this world. Then another god in this terrible situation, there is no justice. I thank you for the assurance that in this life or the next, I or those harmed may find healing and those who are bringing harm, will find forgiveness and ways to know that you love that your love to know your Love and to grow into it. Another in this life and it struggles, please take my hand and help me find paths and places where I can grow in compassion, love and forgiveness. And just couple more mobility ability to always see and know the good is limited God, I asked your Spirit to help me see, know and choose the good. And then the last one, Jesus, you showed us how to stay connected to God's love, even in the midst of the evil and suffering you endured, endured from the Romans. And when your own friends deserted you, Jesus helped me find that love, and that willingness to understand others, even in the midst of my hurt. So different ways that this theodicy might shape how we pray.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 46:01

And I think it's really important for us to be able to say we, we, we want Theology at its best, ought to be able to help us to preach, to pray, and to live the life of discipleship to give us tools for that. So we will do that with each of the theocracies we cover to see see where it could take us in preaching, see where it can take us and praying in a positive way.

Carla Long 46:25

So I have a question that, I don't know if it's a great question, or not a great question. But you know, I grew up on a 40 acre farm in Kansas, and I had amazing parents and amazing life, I got to run all around and do whatever I wanted to and our acre worth of land. And I had a really, really great childhood, and a really great adulthood so far, hopefully, that's gonna continue. And sometimes they feel really far removed from what you're talking about the suffering that you're talking about, because I I don't think I've ever suffered. I mean, I've had hard times everyone has hard times, there's no doubt, and I'm sure that people that I know, who have lived a life that I've lived at all have definitely suffered. I know that that happens. But sometimes I just feel so far removed from that, you know, like, I don't really think I understand actually what suffering is, you know, so I don't know if there's a question in that or not a question in that.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 47:21

No I think I think there's so many implications for that, because it's pretty easy in our culture, and probably all cultures, where there are some people who, because of their heritage, or the color of their skin, or their x socio economics, status within the culture, are, have less suffering. And unfortunately, those who have not had deep suffering, can feel superior and can buy into that theology that, well, if you're good with God, then your life should be comfortable. And that's I think, a huge danger in any society is that for people who don't really haven't experienced, the kinds of things others have experienced, that have have deep pain, or have had evil inflicted on them in very intentional or accidental ways, then that strongly says to those who are suffering, you are the cause for your suffering, you obviously aren't good with God, right? I mean, that's what that's what happens in our culture. And that's part of why we can turn a blind eye to those who suffer for the homeless, for the poor, for the marginalized, for the deported for you know, all of that is because there's that little excuse clause, well, they must have deserved it, or you know, they weren't living right. So there must be

something that they did that caused the situation in their life. So I'm really glad you've mentioned this because this if we don't face that, if we don't acknowledge that, then we can't really entertain the idea that there can be different theodicies because we just were just stuck with the one that well, you know, as good people, we got it pretty easy. And you bad people haven't and so it's actually a really good reason to be able to look at theocracies is to start to dismantle that and to say, Well, the reason some people have suffering in some doesn't, some don't, isn't because God likes some people more than others, or God is judging some people and not others. So it's really, really important, but it's also really important that we make ourselves vulnerable. And, and aware of the suffering that is, perhaps right next door, you know, whether it's generational abuse that's been that's been passed on from generation to generation of whatever kind, you know, whether it's it's poverty that you can't see whether it's substance addictions that people aren't aware of, but the cause all kinds of suffering physically and relationally. And that bring people to these places of complete despair. I think, you know, to be open to the real stories around us, will help us to understand why talking about what is the source of suffering and evil and where is God in it, it will make that very important, no, looking at international situations, and, and letting our imagined imagination take us into the situations of other people, I would say you read young adult books that are that are digging into the, the agony of the those middle years of youth and the suffering that comes. But then, on top of that, you know, authors who deal with issues of, of gender bias and racial bias and sexism and, and let yourself don't be afraid of trying to understand the suffering of others, I guess is, is where I would go, because that's, it's what makes us more human is being vulnerable to others.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 51:49

We have this this hymn that we sing and Community of Christ, let your heart be broken. And in some ways that that could be an an anthem for real Christian discipleship, because it's about opening yourself to others. And I remember this story. An African woman who was from Community of Christ was here for World Conference, and she was staying with a family locally in a probably fairly wealthy neighborhood in a nice suburb. And she kept you know, they would leave through the garage, drive off, go to a conference, be with church people for a very long day. And back at night, through the garage, use the garage door opener into the garage. And she was noticing that all the yards are fenced and everything. And as I recall the story, she she asked her host to help with all these fences, how do you know what's happening to your neighbors? Notice the difference between an African African village culture for example, where you where you, you have to let your heart be broken, because because you're right there with others and, and American suburban culture where we're insulated from each other. And so it's hard to it's hard to know, it's hard to know the misery and heartache that might be going on right next door, it's really hard to know. And also, there's certain aspects of American culture, these parts of American culture where we've been taught to not reveal your, you know, keep secret, you're suffering and struggle, because it's, I don't know, you'll look weak, right, whatever, and

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 53:25

you'll look weak, and you're gonna look like God isn't blessing.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 53:28

And that's that's not the kind of love and vulnerability that message Jesus calls people to right. And so, so it's just it's a great observation, Carla, and, and it also brings up for me as a theologian appointment

is that I don't want you to take this wrong me as it applies to me too. But people who have experienced privilege in the culture have to be very careful when they start talking about theodicy as this intellectual issue. Right? As if, as if we as if we had anything to say about it. We, you know, following up on Shermer, you're saying it, we need to read Holocaust survivor stories. We need to read stories and testimonies about racial abuse and injustice we need to nations peoples. Absolutely. We need to immerse ourselves in the stories of others. So that we can feel with them as much as we possibly can. And then that, that then opens us to the suffering of others in a way that makes room for love. If the if the God we worship in Christian faith is a God who is love, and that God is vulnerable and open to suffering and so, to live in, to live in the love of Jesus Christ must require of us that we learn to live in openness and vulnerability to the suffering of others. That's it Part of the deal.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 55:01

And just as a little practical thing, one of the things about learning some of these theocracies is that when people come to us in the midst of their suffering, and whatever the source might be, that we can give them some other ways of knowing that God is with them, and that God has not deserted them or judge them or found them untouchable. And so, in a, in a very real way, we have some words and some constructs that allow us to say, you know, Jesus suffered. God didn't keep Jesus from suffering, but it doesn't mean that God didn't love Jesus, and that Jesus didn't have an important role in the world. And that's true for you, too. So I you know, there's, there's the pastoral ways that it can be helpful.

Carla Long 55:58

I appreciate that very much. And Tony, what you were saying reminded me of i It's not a meme, but it's something that has gone around on Facebook and the Internet and it's like, don't let your mental exercise cause another pain because it's they're dealing with it personally don't like be like, hustle. How am I? Well, I can mentally discuss this intellectually, because I can do that. And then it's deeply hurting someone else. That's really unfair. really unfair.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 56:24

Absolutely. Sure. Using using our, our knowledge or our intellectual whatever, to abuse other people, right? Even are dismissed

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 56:32

or dismissed as that and so Absolutely, yeah.

Carla Long 56:36

Well, I am so grateful. Thank you so much for this podcast. And I'm looking forward to the next couple of podcasts when we talk more about suffering.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 56:46

We're really looking forward to talking

Tony Chvala-Smith 56:51

And now I know Carla, you can say the word Iranian in public and people will not say you, you should probably see a doctor about. Yeah,

Carla Long 57:02

I feel like I have this Iranian on me. I'm going to close us to today with our podcasts. I just looked up this hymn, let your heart be broken. I'm going to read the last verse. It's a good lesson. "Let your heart be tender and your vision clear. See the world as God sees serve all foreign near. Let your heart be broken by another's pain, share your rich resources, give and give again ." Though, the last one wasn't great, but it I'm really glad you brought that up, Tony because like, I'm gonna remember a lot of what you said, but you know, when I think about let your heart be broken. That's an Iranian theocracy. I like it a lot. Well, thank you so much. I really appreciate it. Thank you, and we will talk again soon.

Josh Mangelson 57:54

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