

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 Carl Long and today you're listening to percolating on faith, where we're talking about all different kinds of theodicy. And if you don't know what that means, you're in the right place because you're going to find out and you're going to be thrilled about it. And I, the people I have talking about them are very special people to me, and I'm guessing to you, their names are Charmaine and Tony Chvala-Smith. Hello, Charmaine. Hello, Tony.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 00:59

Hi, Carla. Good to be with you.

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:01

Hi, Carla. Always a pleasure.

Carla Long 01:03

I was just talking to Charmaine and Tony before we started this interview, and they're melting right now and Independence, Missouri. It's May 2022. Right now and it is hot, hot, hot. So I'm thank you for taking the time and sitting down and talking with me, even though you're just boiling over there.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:23

We are thankful for air conditioning. Let's put it that way.

Carla Long 01:25

Aren't we indeed. So today we're going to be talking about Augustinian theocracies and I again, I just feel super smart saying things like that, so I appreciate the confidence that you have in me to say those words and to talk to you about this because I gotta tell you, I have a lot to learn too. Before we jump into Augustine, though, let's talk about what a theodicy is, let's remind our wonderful listeners what exactly a theodicy is, and why it's important.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:53

Great. So a theodicy, there's, you can hear lots of different theocracies around and even the definition of a theodicy will be determined by which the theodicy you lean towards. So we've come up with kind of a more general neutral definition that should be helpful to everyone. So for the our definition of theodicy is, what is the relationship between God and the suffering and evil found in the world? So you can't really have a theology without brushing up against this reality of suffering and of evil and of pain. And so it's really an important question. And it's been answered in a lot of different ways, by lots of different people over time, but some of them have stuck around more than others, and have had a pretty deep influence. So we would see that there's like four prongs, to, to look at when we go deeper into this

question. So the four four prongs of this question are, why are suffering and evil, so present in human experience, and in the world? So where does it come from? Why is it even there? The second one, why did God create a world in which suffering and evil are even possible? You know, what kind of God would do that? You know, and or how does God see those things? And then the related to that is, question, what does this say about the nature of God, that there's suffering or that there's evil possible? And then the fourth question is, why doesn't God protect us from evil and suffering? Or another take on that question, which I think leads us in a whole different direction is Where is God when we are suffering? So a theodicy is a way of answering those four questions.

Tony Chvala-Smith 03:50

And don't confuse the theodicy with the word theology. Theology is a bigger term. Theology is reflecting on our faith, it's faith seeking understanding. A theology is a way of construing all of the different parts of a religion in a methodical way. theodicy would be a subheading in theology, so it's it is or can be a part of a theology, and most theologies deal with the theodicy question in some way, though, there is not any final answers, right? So that's why we're doing this series of podcasts where we're looking at different approaches to a lot. The previous one we did was on Saint Irenaeus' approach and the Irenaean, or person making the person making the theodicy that has developed from Irenaeus and so today, we're looking at a different figure, St. Augustine, who's a really significant figure in this whole topic and has a different way of understanding the problems related to evil and suffering in the world.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 04:55

So when we're looking at Augustine, when and his dates are around On 354 to 430 CE, and Irenaeus who we talked about last time, this probably is dates,

Tony Chvala-Smith 05:10

Yeah, the second century dies, he dies early 207 202, somewhere around there.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 05:15

So here's Augustine, you know, another 130 or 40 years later. And one of the important things to know is that during the time that Irenaeus is a theologian in the church, the church is this suspicious, strange minority in the Roman Empire, that is experiencing persecution. And, and they're having to try and figure out, who are we and how do we fit in this world? And how, how do we maintain our identity, but here we are with Augustine.

Tony Chvala-Smith 05:53

And Agustin is a famous figure from the period after Christianity has become the Imperial religion. Right. And so there's a whole different relationship between we'll say, church and state and the time of Augustine than there was in the time of America. So it's a different, very different context, some similar issues, but different contexts. Yeah,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 06:13

completely different context. You know, here's Christianity, the favorite religion, now of the empire. And it's popular, it's a to be Christian. In fact, you know, if you want to get ahead in government, you probably want to be a Christian. Because that's how you make connections and show that you're in,

you know, so whole big shift in that 120 or 30 years. So, Augustine is got a different context in which he's living. But we think that the probably the best way to approach Augustine theology, and especially his theodicy is to understand about him and his life, and especially some about his struggles, his struggles in his spiritual journey, because the things he learns about God in his I'm going to call it a tug of war with God over whether or not he wants to actually really commit to being a full time Christian. The things he learns in that whole many years process becomes his lens, his template for understanding how God works in the world, and how and where suffering comes from and where growth comes from, as well. So those it's really important to, to start with, Augustine's owns his own uncertain at times spiritual journey. So I would call him a reluctant Christian. His mother was a very strong Christian, his father, probably not. And he, he had lots of because it was the in thing to be Christian, he, he had a lot of pressure, especially from his mom, to, to embrace this thing more fully. He had an amazing mind, an amazing intellect. He was well acclaimed, respected in the academic world, and, and he consequently had, he was well respected, well known. Lots of the benefits of being in those higher tiers. In his, in his culture, and, and, and yet, there's this, this, you know, the spirit's at work in him, and he knows it. But it's like, I would have to walk away from these kinds of fun things that I'm liking in my life, you know, and because he is kind of an all or nothing person, you know, if he's, if he's going to take this step, he's not going to be a half way Christian. (Laughter) I almost said something else. He's going to embrace it fully. And he and so he knows that he would have to make some choices about some other parts of his life that he would have to let go of, and he doesn't want to, you know, for the longest time, it's like, oh, no, but then there's this still this tugging inside and, and he's, he's already a person who is very aware. I mean, the psychological world draws a lot from Augustinian, Augustine's self understanding. But this battle with God inside of himself or the battle between do I do this or do I not fully commit to this Christian thing? Makes him even more attuned, sensitive, even acutely aware of what's happening inside of him. He turns his intellect inside as well to say, Why am I struggling so much? What is it that is driving me? He becomes aware of his, of his ego and his ego needs. And those that are out of proportion. He, he recognizes when he will cut we'll talk about later self love in a negative way. And, and how it can skew your interactions with others. He he looks at his own chosen evil acts of his during his life and says, Why did I do that? And tries to put that under a microscope. So there's all of this is is going on in his life. He does eventually. Because of his quest for truth. And also, because his mom really, really wanted, he was driven by his quest for truth, and his mother

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 07:02

His mother, St. Monica is the should be the patron saint of helicopter mothers. she just, she just like was there all the time.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 11:13

Yeah, yes, yes, she wanted to plan his married life and all kinds of things. So. So he's so this whole struggle, becomes the lens through which his theology, his understanding of God happens. And so, you know, he sees these decisions to turn away from God in his life. And yet, he recognizes God is still there, God is still inviting God even take some of these things, bad decisions he makes that cause suffering to him and other people. And God seems to be able to use that, to help him to kind of nurture that part of him, that is spiritual, and that is being drawn by God. So he sees God using even his bad decisions, even these times of suffering, even these times when he chooses evil, as ways to help him

keep growing. And so this, that's actually the basis of much of his theodicy is that the, one of the classical descriptions of provenance is that God is of God using even our bad choices, even the evil things in the world to help direct us in some some better ways. So that's, that's the lens. That's the way in which Augustine then approaches his theodicy, some of those features you'll see showing up again.

Tony Chvala-Smith 12:46

So some other things people should know about Augustine. Charmaine mentioned that he he's, he's a professor basically is a professor of rhetoric. And in the ancient world, the rock stars were the orators, right? So in our world, I mean, this will date me in our world, we want to hear Springsteen or want to go hear Joan Jett, or so yes, I'm old. I like these people. But they're, they're, they're like rock stars. And in the classical world, no, it was the orators. You went to hear you went to hear speeches, like we would go to rock concerts. And Augustine was like, right at the top of his game, when it came to being a rock star order. He was brilliant, brilliant Latinus. And he got a job working as an imperial court orator. So he moved, he moved from North Africa, his home to to Italy, to Milan, by this time, Milan had become the imperial capital in the West, not Rome. And so he's in an order there. So Augustine is brilliant with language. He's, his, his conversion, gets him on to the Bible. And he just, he preaches literally hundreds and hundreds of sermons. He's constantly reflecting on the Bible, he reads the Bible, it's kind of a whole narrative beginning to end. And that gives him that's another, another lens that plays into his creation of a least some some tentative responses to the problem of evil. He's theologian, he's philosopher. He's Bishop, he's, he's a Bishop, who packed churches in North Africa. Everybody wanted to hear him speak because he was so brilliant. And he's, he has, he loves people. He loves to be around people. He's, He cultivates friendship a lot. And so his, his the volume of his writings is absolutely huge. One scholar estimates that he wrote over 5 million words. That's a lot of pages. And at the towards the end of his life when knew he was coming the end of his life he, he even had did a work where he wanted to go back through everything he had written and say, here's what I was thinking, then here's how I should have said, here's how I should say it now, you know. More experienced than thought would make me say it differently now, or when I set it down, I think that's probably the better way to say it anyway. So I leave that alone. This, this is a man who was conscious of creating a legacy, really, right. And so, so he's, he's quite the sees, this is no slouch. And he wrote many, many books, but just three of his books, The Confessions, the City of God, and his book on the Trinity, just three of his books, among the many, many things he wrote, those would have already classified him as one of the great theologians of the Western world, but oh, no, he wrote a lot more than those three books. So yeah, Carla?

Carla Long 15:51

I think that you're kind of proving a case for helicopter moms right now, just so you know. I mean, I'm just letting you know that.

Tony Chvala-Smith 16:04

Study hard Augustine, learn your Latin verbs, and you'll do well. And I and I'm here to watch you learn your Latin verbs.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 16:13

And to tell you who, who you should associate with and who you shouldn't and who you can marry and who you can't marry and those kinds of things. So yeah, Mom was,

Carla Long 16:24

She sounds fun.

Tony Chvala-Smith 16:28

So Augustine didn't write like a single book on theodicy, he just dealt, he dealt with the topic in different places. And he dealt with it in his his autobiographical reflection called Confessions. He dealt with it in his this two volume, masterwork, it's such a big word called the City of God, which is really kind of a philosophy of history. And he dealt with it in his letters. He just he wrote, like, hundreds of letters and treatises, and so on, he deals with in bits and pieces. And so when you're talking about an Augustinian theology, it's like, well, you're kind of having to piece it together out of all the stuff you wrote.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 17:03

And it's really interesting, because as we've been preparing for this podcast, we've been reading some different theologians. And it's interesting how different theologians take those bits and pieces, where Augustine is dealing with suffering, evil, those kinds of things, and how they would then characterize what Augustinian theodicy is. And some of them, I mean, different ones focus on different things. But sometimes it's hard to tell they're talking about the same person. So. So that's, that was a fun thing. As we were, you know, some would, would emphasize the idea of God being punitive of God punishing for our sin, while others would say that. People, Augustine saw some things not so much as God's punishment, but as consequences that cause suffering. And that, that, then you learn from those consequences, rather than God actively punishing. And then the idea that, that, you know, some of the bad things that happen in history are because of the effect of humanity on the world. And so there is this negative consequence, that affects everybody. So it's more of a big picture thing rather than a God punishing individuals for individual acts. But that humanity's mistakes, and self love and disregard for others, brings punishment. So it's, there's all these different things that get lifted up to different degrees by different theologians. And so you'll get so we're acknowledging that different people go different places with it. But we're going to try and give you the kind of a clear, clear ish, a summary sort of summary of yeah, thanks of the things that that Augustin raised that others have developed and use beyond that.

Tony Chvala-Smith 19:16

So with each one each figure we cover will say here, here's their context. And Ferguson, there's like three, three points on his context and the one Sherman's already mentioned. It's his personal context. So Augustine continuously thinks about his own inner life, what's going on inside of me, and also what's going on inside of other persons too, but he really wants to understand the nature of the soul, and the nature of how we choose the things we choose and why we do and so he he, his book, Confessions is like a review of his life's journey. And there's the scene in there where me all All fields are all scholars of Augustin always go to the sink. It's kind of interesting. Augustine, the Christian is looking back on his life. And he's looking, he thinks about a teenage prank he was involved in with his buddies, when they stole pears from somebody's pear tree at night and went and threw him to the pigs. Now we would we would we would say, alright, Carla, when you stole pears from your neighbor's tree, I'm just, I'm just

making this up. I don't think you did. But maybe you did. But we'd say, All right, that's just, you know, developmentally, that's what teenagers do. It's a stupid thing. And when you're adult, you probably won't do that anymore. No, no Augustine wants to understand, Why did I do that? And he comes to a really frightening conclusion. He, you know, in the confessions, he says, we had pears in our own yard, and they were better pears than the ones we stole. And we, and we, and we took the pears, even though we didn't need them for food, and we fed them to the pigs. And it was just out of the desire and joy of doing something that was wrong. And so he starts to analyze that what is that in us? As he's back, as we're talking about evil and suffering? Where is evil and suffering come from in the world? And what's God's relation to it. And Augustine, right there is analyzing how human beings have this capacity within them to do evil for its own sake, and not not to get any good out of it. And so that's us doing a deep psychological died there to try to understand motivations. And in Confessions. Also, yes, it reflects on infants. And there's the story in the confessions, where he, he is observing a mother who is trying to nurse twins. And he observes that he observes the look of absolute wrath on one of the twins face when the other twin gets to nurse first. And he's saying, what is that? Now we think developmentally, right, we think, well, it's just, you know, they're just infants, they don't really...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 22:00

we have science and psychology and all of that to work with.

Tony Chvala-Smith 22:04

Augustine doesn't have that. Augustine is observing and he's saying that unchecked is what becomes wrath and a human and leads to murder and death, and so on. In other words, he sees already in the infant, the capacity to think that what they want is more important than what anybody else wants. And so, and indeed, psychologically, if that, if that's unchecked in a person, it leads to horrible things. I mean, really horrible things, culturally, historically, politically, and so on and personally, and we probably all

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 22:39

have seen that look on a two year olds face too, and they're not getting what they want. Yeah. So yes.

Carla Long 22:46

So I've only seen that four or five times in the last 30 minutes. So yeah, I know exactly what you're talking about.

Tony Chvala-Smith 22:54

And you had no idea that you have a monster right there. You're very missed, right?

Carla Long 22:59

I sure didn't get monsters now napping peacefully upstairs. So yeah.

Tony Chvala-Smith 23:04

So So you have to take really seriously Augustus personal context when he when he thinks about and talks about the nature of evil and suffering and, and pain in the world, because he's, he's, he does want

to take seriously our own complicity in it. Right? And so that's important to know, a second context piece is that,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 23:23

There's just one little piece that I want to add into that I think we'll probably touch on it later. But with that is that is also that awareness, that forgiveness is available, always available, that that as we recognize those things in ourselves that cause harm, or damage, that, again, God is still there, inviting us, asking us to turn. And So forgiveness is is a part of all of that as well. So is that there's a bit of good news in there.

Tony Chvala-Smith 24:01

And he and the Christian Augustine recognizes that and, you know, deals with that. Frequently that's so important to him. So the second the second context piece, is when we talked about Irenaeus, we talked about him having to struggle with this religion religious philosophical trend called Gnosticism that took all kinds of different shapes Well, it's still around in Augustine this time and it now takes takes a particular form in a religion called Manichaeism. And so Gnosticism and Manichaeism taught that the world is actually a battle between good and evil. And both things are real. They're their own kind of deities, a good God, a bad God, and the material world and all the suffering and misery that comes with it. That's part of being connected to the bad God. And so,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:56

so our bodies are bad. Nature is bad, the physical world.

Tony Chvala-Smith 25:03

So this this creates a dualism Spirit good matter bad. And Christianity has had to deal with us in all kinds of forms ever since the second century. And then Augustine in the fourth century, still dealing with it then, constantly having to deal with it. We still have to deal with it today. But you know, before Augustine was a Christian, he was a Manichi he, he had he found Manichaeism intellectually intriguing and desirable. But the more he, the more he thought about his own life and problems and issues, the more he found it not satisfying. And so he worked his way out of it on his path to becoming a Christian. But so, Augustine, Augustine rejects this idea of there being two, two forces at war, good and evil, and both are real, tangible things, and that

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 25:55

they're of equal power

Tony Chvala-Smith 25:57

to more or less yes, right. He rejects the idea on the basis of the Christian doctrine of creation, on the basis of his reading of the book of Genesis. God, God is the Creator of all things, spiritual, physical, whatever, and all things are good, each in their own way. There are degrees of goodness, but nothing that God creates is bad. And so the body, the flesh, and so on, none of this is bad, per se, there's not and there's not this kind of, there's not this eternal deathmatch between good and evil that's going on God, God is sovereign over the world. Still, he has to account for the existence of evil but but it's always good to know that in the background, he's he's got that, that Gnostic dualism stuff that he's fighting

against. And then a third, a third thing that's part of his context. It's a little just a little bit later in his life, is that he lived in a time when the western part of the Roman Empire was in visible decline. I mean, like, the street, we drove on in Kansas City this morning. It would, it would fit perfectly in the late Western Roman Empire. So he's got that. Rome in the West ain't what it used to be. But on top of that, in the year 410, a whole bunch of Visigoths came into the city of Rome and destroyed the city of Rome, sacked it burned, it, raped, pillaged, looted, and so it was horrible. The Eternal City fell to the Visigoths in 410. And it's really hard for us to imagine what that was like for Romans by this time, Romans are mostly all Christians. And so they, they're, they're good. They love their nation, love their country, love their city love their traditions and heritage. And so it's Rome is no longer the evil empire by the time of Augustine, it's the good empire. And, you know, imagine if a bunch of Visigoths destroyed Washington, DC, right. So oh, wait, (some tried. Anyhow) Almost, but, but. But anyway, imagine psychologically, existentially how that would feel to us. That's part of his framework, and has all these refugees coming from Italy, over to North Africa, where it's more or less safe, at least it's safe for 20 years. And they're bringing tales of violence, these are traumatized people. And then many of them, probably most of them, in some way, are Christian, and they're saying, How did God let this happen? Right? Why would God let all this destruction happen to to Rome, the Eternal City? Where's God and all this? And actually, he he writes that massive book city of God? In part to kind of respond to that question, he comes up with an answer in that book, or several answers, but one that that good patriotic Romans might not have liked, but but still, he's trying to deal with the problem. That's part of his context, his his culture is failing. And, and so how do you deal with the suffering that creates visible suffering that creates so those are all the contexts pieces, that goes into, you know, some of the main points of his, his way of thinking about even the existence of evil and suffering, so contexts pieces now we'll just go into some of the points he I say the points he makes remember, he makes them in different places and, and theologians reading Augustine for centuries have kind of, they've looted the customs works and created this is this is more or less a picture of his theodicy. So that's what we're doing here. So the first thing we want to want to say then is that for Augustine, evil is not a thing. Evil is a no thing. Yet it doesn't have existence. To see for Augustine to have being to have existence is the definition of goodness and evil does not have existence now because evil is a a nothing a no thing (a negating right of the good.) He uses the Latin term *privatio boni*--the privation of the good, the lessening of the good Charles Matthews uses the word lessening the lessening of the good. So, what went when I when I catch a bad cold, right? Because of a cold virus or whatever. What happens is a lessening of health. Right? So, the the illness, the illness, though it's caused by a virus from a from a Augustine's perspective and the fourth century, the illness isn't like a demonic power assaulting me the illness is a lack of something. Right? And so this this is a way he fights against Gnosticism and Manichaeism, right that, that evil think of evil as a kind of shadow, a shadow. But interestingly, we human beings because of that thing, he that pear tree thing, we find ourselves strangely attracted to the shadow. What is what what accounts for that? Why? Why would we who exist? What and have been? Why would we be attracted to non being? Right? Well, we're gonna get to that minute, that's going to be his understanding of the nature of sin. So but so, um, where did this where did this negation come from? It wasn't there at the beginning, from Augustine's point of view. God created the universe. And God said that it was very good. In the, in the in the beginning now, all right, stop for a second. Augustine is a fourth fifth century person, he reads his Bible, then in Latin, and he thinks Adam and Eve are real people. And he thinks, you know, so we just have to let him be who he was in that time. Right? So but he's asking the quite yesterday questions. And so where does this negation come from? And what he

says is that privation, the choice for non being, that arises from the free choice of finite beings, finite beings that were good, somehow. And here, he's thinking of both angels, and then Adam and Eve somehow, were attracted to the negation and chose it. And that choice, then opens the possibility of negation into the creation, God permitted, but God did not cause it. So,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 32:48

God allows free choice makes that possible. And so, this negation of the good is possible and even appealing at time, times people.

Tony Chvala-Smith 33:03

Yeah. So that so if you ask us and so weird, and all this evil and suffering start Augustine dancer to be it started there. Right? It started with, with the choice that he imagines creation and taking place in, in spheres. And there's the angelic sphere and the earthly sphere. And in both spheres, there was this turning away from being and from goodness towards the allure of non-being. And that opened the door to damage. So the next point that would be these wrong, wrong choices by these free beings have damaged the whole system. Right? So, so including the human will and perception, right? We're our ability to perceive things accurately well, and so on. And our ability to choose the good is also damaged in this. We can we longed for the good and we seek it. But all of us, all of us have experiences where we said I knew I knew what was good to do. And there's part of me that wanted to but I didn't choose it,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 34:13

but I ate the whole chocolate bar anyway.

Tony Chvala-Smith 34:15

Right? I actually ate the whole pizza, Carla. I knew that it was bad. But I did it anyway. So so my will was damaged once I stopped bubbling cheese and pepperoni.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 34:31

It's kind of like our perceptions are twisted by this these ongoing wrong choices or and so and it but that builds on itself and then affects the people around and so yeah, all of reality is then skewed.

Tony Chvala-Smith 34:51

Right so the fall for Augustine is the start of the start of all this,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 34:53

Fall meaning Adam and Eve and their choice is right. Yeah, absolutely from the the tree they weren't supposed to right

Tony Chvala-Smith 35:05

and so this so as well as evil being a privation evil is also connected to a Charles Matthews calls a perversion. Right? A desire to choose what is not what is not good. So we live in a messed up reality, we still have free choice, it's damaged, but we live in a messed up reality. And so in this messed up system, bad things happen. And then we in our selfishness continue to add to it. Right, so we add to it by, by continuing to, even sometimes when we're trying to seek the good we we we mess things up.

And that continues to add to the suffering of the world so much, much of the evil that we experienced, Augustine would say, human beings in some fashion are responsible for. And that's, that's Augustine. And that's that's probably the most difficult thing here because if you start trying to transplant his thought into the 20th century and apply it to something like the Holocaust, it really looks horrible. So one has to be really careful. But remember, he's trying to think this through as a fourth and fifth century person. And he has actually some things we can learn from so one thing here is that when Augustine talks about responsibility, he's thinking in macro and not micro terms, that's pretty important. So for Augustine, if we could move Augustine to our on time, Augustine wouldn't say, God's smites a person with COVID-19, because of a specific sin. So he doesn't think like that, rather than that individual is not fully an individual, because the individual is part of a system, right? I am part of a community part of a culture part of a country. That's a complex inter interconnected web. And that web is marked not only by goodness, but also by things like self-deception, and selfishness, and malice, and freedom to disregard the well-being of the whole. So the individual lives in system, it's already marred by all of that. All that kind of self. And so yeah, yes, suffering and pain, COVID-19 could have been dealt with better, wasn't predestined, and anything, it could have been dealt with better. But because of this broken reality, we're part of, it's been dealt with in a broken way. And so a particular individual doesn't get COVID-19 and die from it because of a particular sin. Rather, the individual is part of a web of inter relations. And within that web are people who prefer malice and self-deception, over the caring for others. And so that's, it's, it's kind of a shared a shared experience.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 38:04

Yeah. And I think, you know, the more specific kinds of things we can say, you know, in some ways, what he's saying was, has been borne out, you know, the, the, the selfishness and the neglect and the denial, that have come around racial issues in the US has meant that unequal living conditions unequal health care, unequal, clean air, and water has meant that there are certain people who have been more affected, because of the, the blindness, the selfishness of others. So, in the in the big picture, you can see that some people are suffering because of the sin of the, of the whole. So that kind of translates, alright. But if you take it too far, then then you can, you know, you can make every natural disaster, somebody's fault. And so, you know, with climate change some natural disasters, there is an identifiable fault, but, you know, others not. So, anything, this is a place where we have to remember and recognize that Augustine lives in a pre scientific age, a time when the understandings of disease or of weather patterns, or of geological shifts, all of those kinds of things, those aren't really available to him. And so he can't work those into his theodicy in understanding things like disease or why some people are, are ill become ill or have more suffering than others.

Tony Chvala-Smith 39:51

So he was so you know, Augustine in his time in place would say because he doesn't know stuff about weather, weather patterns and so on. He would see weather disasters as part of this broken reality, this reality that was broken by the bad choices that got the thing,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 40:08

That Adam and Eve made and everyone since.

Tony Chvala-Smith 40:13

But he would see things like weather disasters as evil because they lessen being they robbed they robbed things of being. So, and to follow up on sharing missing lots of times in the theodicy question theologians and philosophers will separate evil into natural evil and moral evil Moral Evil is obvious it's when we choose to do bad things that harm others natural evil, classically used, disasters you know, lightning strikes somebody disasters that happen that do not come through moral fault, but are just they're in the wrong place at the wrong time. They're evil because in Augustine says they lesson being but the currently in our in our era, weather disasters and moral evil seem to be connected, there's a connection. So we don't want to I mean, we see that for different reasons from what Augustine would see it, but it might come out might come out kind of the same. So, so um, the next point want to make here is that human experience and human relations and relationships and human perceptions for Augustine, are all their distorted. We see all these things as if through cataracts, right? And what what distorts them is what Augustine calls amor sui, love of self self love. So in Augustine, the concept is, you don't want to confuse it with our modern kind of therapeutic counseling concept, which is a good one of self acceptance, he's not talking about self acceptance, when he uses the term self love, he's talking about inordinate focus on the needs, wants, desires of the self. Even the worship of the self, making myself a center of the universe, and my desires, wants, wishes and so on. And by making myself the center of everything, in other words, by making myself God, we I actually distort our ability to see things clearly. To see each other clearly, to love clearly, and so on the thing that we're called to do love God and neighbor and self, we have a hard time doing because self love has a corrupting influence on it were much, much later in the theological tradition, Martin Luther whose good Augustinian, Martin Luther will use the Latin phrase Incurvatus in se , to be curved in on ourselves, or put it this way. We are in orbit around ourself. That's what self love is for Augustine and this self love leads again and again and again to consequences that span the spectrum from painful to disastrous, right. Seeking what only the self wants can create difficulty in one's personal life that it can create difficulty in the culture can create difficulty politically, socially, it has, it has can have monstrously evil consequences. So, so self interest and love of self, these are present in all of human experience, even in the midst of our best moments Augustine would say. So that's, and again, this is Augustine thinking about himself, he's reflecting. And if we take the time to think about, you know, our best moments, if we really think about all of the angles and look behind the corners, in those best moments, we may see things like pride, we may see things like haha, I'm better than so on. So, you know, and

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 44:08

we do or doing things that seem good so that we will get a claim or acknowledged all of those things. So

Carla Long 44:17

I'm actually feeling a little personally attacked here.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 44:22

Good. Augustine would be pleased because he's, he is not a finger pointer. Because he's acknowledging where it's coming from his self understanding, and as he shares it, he recognizes that other people recognize themselves as well. And so yeah, we have it's there.

Tony Chvala-Smith 44:44

Church life is full of examples. People like don't donating with air quotes aren't donating, you know, \$10,000 to the church to buy an X, but if you buy the wrong X, they want to withhold they want to they want to wear withdraw their money, right? Or that's my pew my family paid for that pew there's all kinds of stuff in church life where were the good it appears that we are doing is actually in the interest of self. And this this from Augustine's perspective I suspected this is a major source of all kinds of human suffering and pain. Right that that we a pretended good we honor each other for pretended goods when behind it. What's the pretender? Good is concealing darker motives.

Carla Long 45:29

Actually, I can I can see this and you know, we in community, Christ, we talked about sermon ministry and when you are in priesthood, you're supposed to it's a lowering down and not a raising up. And I think at our best when we our best selves, maybe Augustine would agree with me, but I doubted. The the servant ministry part that we try and do is something that's exactly what we should be doing. I when I call people to priesthood, I'm like, just so you know, it is not fun all the time. It is not fun most of the time. It is. And so I feel like that's what he's talking about in other churches. I know that priesthood is like a lifting oneself up and over and above. And it sounds like Augustine would be very much against that.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 46:14

Yes, that would be accurate. In fact, when once he did make that shift, and let it allowed himself to be fully converted, how old was he at that point?

Tony Chvala-Smith 46:26

Well, gosh, he's, I think he's in his 30s. I can't remember.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 46:31

His, his his right to make some choices over his own life are kind of snatched away from him. Like when he was ordained, yes. Oh, my God, when when he is forced to be a servant of all. So Tony, Oh,

Tony Chvala-Smith 46:47

Yes. This is how Agustin gabardine so Agustin after his conversion experience in Italy, he and a group of people move back to North Africa. He wants to form kind of like a little monastery where they reflect read scripture, right talk, you know, pray, worship,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 47:06

Step back out of the very public view that he had been accustomed to become reflective,

Tony Chvala-Smith 47:13

which by the way, gives you a sense of his social class because the average worker person can do this. But but so they moved back to North Africa. And Augustine's fame had preceded him and everybody knows he's a Christian. Everybody remembers him as the rock star order. He's really brilliant, so on, and he's in church one day. And when I say church in fourth century, Roman North Africa, everybody you stood at, you know, you stood you stood for the service, the bishop sat up front in

a chair, the Cathedral, the bishops chair, and there's this worship service where the bishop, the bishop sees him back there. And the Bishop is getting old and the Bishop's like, "You know, what we need is new leadership. Lock the door!" Basically, I'm kind of paraphrasing the story. But and there's Augustine back there. Everybody's like, yeah, he's here. He's really good. He's cool. And so to make a long story short, Augustine got himself ordained that day, and all of his plans for a quiet contemplative life just got ruined, because now he's a priest. And then he becomes an assistant to the Bishop, and then he becomes Bishop of Hippo, the major city in North Africa, he now becomes a public figure, who's everywhere in demand. And he rolls with it. Right? His he recognizes his life now is not his own in the way that he wanted to control it and so on. But that actually leads us pretty well into the next point, because you might be thinking at this point, well, I see if everything is messed up, broken, saturated with self love. What's the good news in here? Well, for Augustine the good news is that God is nevertheless infinite, and thus fully present. In his in his confessions, this is one of the greatest lines in his confessions in the confessions is a 400 page long prayer, Carla, it's a very long prayer. Nobody ever prayed this in a community. Nobody who even prays long prayers,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 49:17

the two of you gotta quit complaining about my prayers.

Tony Chvala-Smith 49:21

Right? When the evangelist is praying in a community, Christ's worship service and you think, for the love of Mary, how long is this going to go on? Just remember, it's not going to go on 400 pages in Latin. So but anyway, so in this beautiful prayer, he says to God, as he's looking back at his early life and all the stupid stuff he did, the mistakes he did and all the selfishness in his early life, he says, You are with me. I was not with you. In other words, God does not has not abandoned the creation. God has not left the building. God is not observing from outside God is intimately present in the midst of all things as God, right. And, and so God is acting for good in the creation in hidden ways, right in the midst of stuff.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 50:15

And even in such hidden ways that God is able to take some of our mistakes and create something out of them that we could not have imagined. That that will lead to good or reclamation or growth.

Tony Chvala-Smith 50:29

So Augustine, God can be trusted to bring greater good out of even all of our mess ups and all history's mess ups. And so it gives them a sense of confidence and optimism in his theology, even while he's very, very realistic about our human propensities. There's this saying, that really applies well to Augustine ins theodicy, in his view of divine providence is the saying is, God draws straight with our crooked lines. So we freely choose our crooked lines. And in Augustine theology, our, our impaired wills, like crooked lines a lot and we like looking over the abyss and we like looking at nothingness and, and toying with non being and all that. But for Augustine God is much faster than all of that. And for Augustine, goodness, will ultimately prevail, because for Augustine God is goodness itself. The essence of God is goodness. And so God can't not be unlike everything else, US planets, angels, which are all contingent beings, God cannot be God. God is. And that means that that goodness, which is the heart of the divine nature can't be destroyed. And so regardless of what's happening, regardless if your empire is falling and crumbling around you, regardless of you, and this is Augustine, he's when

he's in his last couple of weeks of life, he's dying. And those various Germanic tribes and hordes that they'd crossed over from Spain, and in North Africa, they'd been coming down the coast towards Hippo, and they by the, as Augustine is dying, they've surrounded his city. And so his, his biographer, Procedia, says, the last part of his life was the most painful because he saw this destruction happening, he couldn't stop it. And yet, for Augustine, God remains good. And goodness, ultimately will prevail, because evil is no thing. Evil has no substantive existence, except whatever we give it by yielding to it, but it has not it does not have an eternal existence. And so, goodness will ultimately prevail for Augustine. And so there's a really positive beautiful note in his theology, theology and the Odyssey. That you, sometimes we just have to trust that in the long game, even if even if the short game we're involved in is messed up. So So that's part of his response. A final thing about us this is an additional point in relation to the whole question of evil and suffering, so on. This is a really interesting idea. Augustine has this concept that is referred to as plenitude, abundance, or fullness. And so Augustine is trying to make sense of a universe that has a lot of suffering and loss in it. And one of the ways he makes sense of it is that he says, Well, you know, God has created the universe, or world with the most possible beings in it. And those beings sometimes conflict with each other.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 54:03

So it's kind of the most possible beings but the most possible variety, right? I've been thinking of lifestyle of language of how one appears all of those things. And it's an it's a good thing. All this variety, thirsty,

Tony Chvala-Smith 54:20

right? So for us that that's the best possible world God would God creates with plenitude, and by having the most possible different beings? Well, the problem, of course, is that that's going to mean that human beings will have to interact at times with mosquitoes and poison ivy and rattlesnakes and viruses

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 54:38

and people that they don't like or have biases against.

Tony Chvala-Smith 54:42

I did mention rattlesnakes! But you see each of those things in and of itself, mosquito poison ivy rattlesnake virus, because it has being it is good. It has a it has a goodness intrinsic to itself, right? But what happens is that each of these things, has its own realm. But in creating a universe with the most possible beings, there's gonna, there's going to be collisions between them.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 55:14

Or pop up against each other and be abrasive to each other.

Tony Chvala-Smith 55:17

And then then there'll be harm. So harm from these collisions. So, in this particular case, it doesn't look like Augustine doesn't see the harm. I mean, North Africa, North Africa is full of vipers. I mean, it doesn't he doesn't see the the harm he doesn't see the harm and death that might be caused from a snake bite as necessarily from sin. It's colliding systems, right? It's systems that in their own frame are

good. Right? The Viper, the Viper is poisonous for well a frog, in our view, an evolutionary reason. It's, it's venom, helps it digest the mammals that it eats, right? Not so good when it's when it bites your foot. But so this is collision of system, there's the natural consequences of colliding systems. And so suffering in the systems is not due to sin, per se, right? It's, it's just because it's a complex web. And yet, God knows that and from, Augustine would say, from the God's eye perspective, it's, it's better, it was apparently better in God's view that there'll be the most full possible world, then that there'll be a world in which there are no mosquitoes, ticks, rattlesnakes, Poison Ivy, and there's just a few favorite humans, you don't have to interact with them. Right? So it's better, it's better that there's, think of it this way, it's better that there's more different kinds, then there's only then there being fewer few, a few kinds that don't collide. So, so that's just another part of the puzzle with the picture with Augustine I don't know that he develops this further, but different theologians referenced this in in relation to Augustinian theodicy. The interesting thing is that human beings, with our self love, we we sometimes don't want there to be a plenitude of beings. And so we drain swamps, we drain wetlands, we suck the life out of the out of the ecosystem, and so on,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 57:28

or we practice genocide or war

Tony Chvala-Smith 57:32

towards what is other and so and so what was intended by God was variety, human beings, and the variety would have natural collisions in Sure. But human beings because of our self love, want to reduce the variety to one, the US so. So those are, I mean, that's kind of a tour of Augustine and Augustinian traditions, trying to deal with the question of suffering and evil and so on. It's not none of these things that will, none of the systems that we deal with will have final answers, but they give pieces that might be useful to people. So, so it will stop, Carla, and see if there's any questions before we go on to our how to preach? How to preach from the perspective of an Augustinian theodicy and how to pray from this perspective. So questions?

Carla Long 58:21

You've done a really great job of talking about him. I've learned a lot already. I will say that I had a little bit of gastrointestinal difficulties when you're telling the story about the bishop and saying lock the door. It's time for someone else to take over. I did I bet he also was feeling it deep. Very deep.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 58:43

Yeah, exactly. Yeah,

Tony Chvala-Smith 58:45

I ate too many olives this morning. This is not a good time.

Carla Long 58:48

I actually need to leave that door. So. So that was that was a little stressful to hear. But I'm glad we're moving on to how to preach and how to maybe pray about this Augustinian theodicy because, you know, again, I think I asked this last time during the Ireanean theodicy I'm like, okay, that's really cool to know. What are we, what do we do? What do I do with that? So yeah, let's get let's jump into that part.

Tony Chvala-Smith 59:18

So I'll just stick with a few topics for preaching and again, we're gonna say each time, alright, you don't preach a theodicy. A theodicy is essentially it's a theory. Right? It's an attempt on the part of a theologian to work out these different pieces. But suffering people don't need theories, right? They need love and care and our presence. So that said, there might be there might be some themes in Augustine's dealing with this topic that could be useful in different kinds of preaching settings. So for example, the the sheer goodness of being to be is good by definition. There's definitely a sermon in that. Right. I think that's really important. And that doesn't mean that we never talk about soon But for Agustin sin is sin as a parasite on top of the thing that's really good, right? So another one, this whole idea of plenitude, honoring the rich variety of creation and recognizing that human attempts to reduce variety or diminish it or control it, run against the grain of creation, and hence run against the will of the Creator. So variety, and Augustine is the only variety is intrinsic to creation. So, that's kind of interesting thing. God's capacity for new creation, in the midst of our brokenness, loss and tragedy God, God gives new starts all the time. Be a good a good thing, a good place to connect Agustin to like if you're preaching on the Joseph story in the Hebrew Bible, where God did not cause Joseph's suffering. The brothers did. But God uses the whole story, too. It's a sad story. But he God uses the story to make a different path open into the future.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:01:04

And another place to go with this is that sense that our sin, if you want to use that word, our mistakes are bad choices, or even our self love in the negative way. It does not deter God from being with us. In fact, God is creatively trying to work with what is happening in us and even the pain and the suffering that happened. So God does not desert us just because we fail at these epic goodness. God keeps helping us find a way.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:01:44

So yeah, and so another one like Romans, or if you were preaching on Romans five, which is a rich but difficult text, there's 520 words. It says we're sin increased, Grace abounded all the more. That's, that's beautiful. For Augustine, Grace, always super abounds overtop of whatever mistakes and mess ups we have. Now, another theme from Augustine for preaching is the indestructibility of grace. Grace is divine goodness turn healing Lee towards us floundering struggling creatures. So Grace cannot be destroyed. Because it's not a thing. But it's God's own nature. So and no one, for Augustine, no one is beyond the reach of grace. So that's really important. All right, and a couple of sermons on sin. I know this is a difficult topic. What about sin is self deception?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:02:35

And the ways that we hide from ourselves what is real, what is really happening in us what we're really what our actions are really saying how our attitudes are really affecting those around us. There's so many ways that we're self deceptive in the little in the little things, but the ways that often are destructive, as well.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:02:57

Definitely. For Augustine since it takes the shape of refusing to see my complicity in structures that bring harm to others, right? So also for Augustine, sin is a denial of interconnectedness, refusing to accept that we are interconnected. But for Augustine, we're created to be a living system of community because Augustine is very Trinitarian. For Augustine, God is the lover of the beloved and the love. And so human beings are created for by Augustine's reading of Scripture and so on. Human beings are created to live in community. But denying interconnectedness and community is part of self love for Augustine. And then one one other area, I wouldn't say final one other area that Augustine is really helpful in is how to seek good even in the midst of moral ambiguity. Reinhold Niebuhr, in the 20th century was the great American theologian and ethicist who really understood Augustine and wellness, it's kind of an Nieburian way. But for Augustine, the good, the good, to see good is always to try to love God and love neighbor. That's for Augustine, the heart of the heart of Scripture, the heart of everything, love God, love neighbor. And so for him, when all the other moral landmarks get washed away, you can still ask for grace. To love God and love neighbor, even when everything else feels ambiguous and messed up. So those are some things for preaching Now we'll turn to praying.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:04:29

To praying. So there's lots of different places one could go and there's even some negative places people could go. When people have the tendency to take parts of Augustine theology or approach to theodicy and make it all about sin and punishment. Those are really not, those are not helpful ways to go with praying, but I think that there's a lot of places to go and the first one is you is kind of with that idea of plenitude that Tony was just talking about. "Thank you, God, for the overwhelming variety of people that exist, and the many ways of seeing you and reality. When I become afraid of so many options, and I'm tempted to think that I alone know you are only I comprehend the world rightly. I bring judgment on others and harm to the beautiful patchwork of humanity. God, come my insecurity and help me open my heart to the many huge beauty of your world and your truth. So that's one way of letting plenitude reshape us." Another short prayer. "God, you and I both see the mess I've made of this situation. My love of being the center of attention, or of my comfort, or the love of this misbegotten idea that I'm better than others, has caused damage to the lives of others who I care about, and so damaged my own as well. God helped me use this moment of clarity as a new place from which to grow, and from which to accept my partialness, my brokenness, my need for forgiveness, helped me turn." And then a very short one. "God, help me grow humility, from the compost of my pride." And then a very another short one, that is from her book story of a soul. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, whose dates are 1873 to 1934-97. She wrote, and I think it just fits very well here. I know now that true charity consists in bearing all our neighbors defects, not being surprised at their weakness, but edified at their smallest virtues. Amen.

Carla Long 1:07:14

Amen. Indeed. I was reminded of this in the middle of the podcast, but I didn't want to bring it up until you just said it, Charmaine, and you know that in my first ordination, when I was ordained to be a priest, by Wendy Ballard, my Australian mother in Australia, she prayed specifically for humility for me. I mean, she asked God, but I could be a more humble person. It did nothing at all.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:07:41

So you like that one about

Carla Long 1:07:44

It means something to me. Yes.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:07:46

let humility grow in the compost of my pride. Yes.

Carla Long 1:07:52

Yes, I Well, gosh, this has been awesome. Thank you so much. I, I, I feel like I understand a guest and a little bit more. I know who Augustine is. And I talked about Augustine sometimes, but I feel like I could talk about him a little bit more intelligently. Now, thanks to you, too.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:08:08

Well, I think that the key with Augustine is again, understanding his own journey, because if we can understand his spiritual, emotional, psychological journey, and we'll probably use what he said in a more productive way.

Carla Long 1:08:26

Yeah, I think really could come across a little holier than now if you didn't know his story, perhaps. Exactly.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:08:31

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:08:33

It would be helpful for anybody trying to encounter Agustin to know that he, he struggled with his inner conflicts his whole life. They didn't know he just learned how to use them. But they didn't go away. That's pretty, pretty important.

Carla Long 1:08:46

Yes, that's very helpful. Well, thank you so much, Tony. Thank you so much, Charmaine, you're wonderful and it's great to talk to you today.

Josh Mangelson 1:08:59

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