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Project Zion Podcast

Josh Mangelson 00:17

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

Carla Long 00:32

Hello, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla Long, and you're tuning in to our series: Percolating on Faith, God Shots, with your favorite guests Charmaine and Tony Chvala-Smith. Yay. Welcome back, dear friend.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 00:48

Hi, Carla. How are you doing?

Carla Long 00:50

Great. So, today, we are continuing through the book, *Faith Seeking Understanding*. And we're on the chapter that I'm calling "What are human beings?" This should be so easy. The answer is, we all are, done and done. What a great podcast, Charmaine and Tony.

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:08

That's the shortest podcast, ever.

Carla Long 01:12

I just feel so enlightened. I learned so much. I should write a book.

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:17

It will be a short book, Carla.

Carla Long 01:21

Well, that's absolutely true. I actually thought that really was the title of the chapter and then Tony told me what the real title was and I'm like, my title is better. Maybe, Tony, you should tell us what the real title is to chapter seven.

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:37

Sure, chapter seven...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:38

Daniel Migliore's book is called *Faith Seeking Understanding*. We're using it as a recap. We're using this as a way of doing a systematic theology, a Christian theology. This comes because

a seeker once said, “I feel like I need to start all over and look at Christianity anew.” That's why we started this particular series looking at what are these different aspects of Christianity, and to look at them through the lens of mainline Christian thought. So, with each of these God Shots we've been doing a different one of the categories that would make up a systematic theology.

Tony Chvala-Smith 02:30

This chapter in Migliore's book is titled, “Humanity as Creature, Sinner, and New Being in Christ”. You were totally bored by that title, I think, weren't you, Carla?

Carla Long 02:48

Well, “What Are Human Beings” is just a little bit more catchy. So, let's just jump into it. What does it mean to be human?

Tony Chvala-Smith 02:58

Hmm. That's a profound question. We've talked in other podcasts about God as mystery, and the divine mystery and the mystery of the Trinity, and so on. And yet, we have to honestly say that human beings are a mystery. We are a mystery to ourselves. We all wonder about who we are. What is our purpose? Why are we here? What are we to do? What does it mean to live well? What does it mean to live faithfully? What does it mean to love? What does it mean to be a person? It's not just Christianity as a religion that offers responses. Pretty much every world religion, and all kinds of philosophies, secular and otherwise, wrestle with the question, what are human beings? What is it? What is it about us that makes us worth anything at all, or interesting to get to know? So yeah, in some ways we are as much a mystery to ourselves as God is to us.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 04:05

And we were kind of the focus of our own study. Think about some of the different disciplines like sociology, the study of people as in groupings and as cultures, or psychology, how the human mind and the human personality works or doesn't work. There's a lot within our own culture that is constantly trying to say, Who are we? What makes a human being a human being? What does a human culture... what is it made up of? and what are the elements that affect how individuals are shaped and all that kind of thing. So, it's actually a pretty big topic, though we may not always think of it as being something that we're constantly reflecting on.

Tony Chvala-Smith 05:04

Yeah, and, you know, at least in Western consumer cultures, we're given all kinds of messages all the time that try to keep us from thinking very much about this. Human beings are consumers, right? That's kind of a message we received. You exist in order to consume things, and to wear the right clothes and to be on top of stuff and be fashionable or to be this

and that, and it's like, wow, there's got to be more to us than that. There really has to be more to human life than that.

Carla Long 05:46

Well, absolutely, if it's true what it says in Genesis, that we are made and created in the image of God, then I think that God is much, much more than a mere consumer. At least, I really hope so.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 06:01

Yeah, that's a really great way to tie that in. One of Migliore's beginning places is to explore what does it mean that humans are made in God's image. He does a really great job in his chapter, and we'll probably touch on some of the things he said, but we'll be wandering about. Anyone who's read the chapter will say, I didn't hear them talk about this, this, or this. We're not really going to try and give you a recap of the chapter, but this is an area where he really does some fun exploring about what this means that we're made in God's image and what it doesn't mean. One of the things that he explores is the idea in the first Genesis story of being made in God's image. He's very clear that this is not about our physical bodies, our stature. It's not like, human beings look like God. He's saying that there have been some groups that have talked about it that way, but that's been discarded long, long ago. It's not about our physical being. What it says is that humans were created in God's image, male and female, and that there's a mutuality there about male and female, there isn't a hierarchy. That's something that's often lost in patriarchal societies. That is the first description of what it means to be made in God's image, male and female. He goes from there and explores some of the possibilities.

Tony Chvala-Smith 08:37

And also, he says, it's not that the image of God is like we're a carbon copy of some dude or woman in a sky. Sometimes in the history of Christian thought, the image of God has been taken to refer to our rational nature, our ability to think rationally. He says, it's not that either. The image of God does not refer to something in us, some faculty of human beings that somehow we have a mind, God has a mind, and therefore that's the image of God. It's much more holistic, I think, is what he's trying to get at. Human beings are created to reflect divine reality. And the divine reality is communal. That's part of his argument in the chapter. I think I got that right, Charmaine?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 09:34

Yeah, that it's about relationship. What makes us "being" in the image of God is that we are made for relationship... that we are made, not just for ourselves, but for community, for family, for interaction. And that is the characteristic of God that is created in humanity.

Tony Chvala-Smith 10:08

So, the idea of being in the image of God, it's a symbolic expression that captures, relationality or being created for relationship, being created to reflect the good God who made everything good, being created to live in relationship and mutuality with each other. This image of God applies to every single human person and that's got profound ethical consequences for us, too. Because if every single person is a reflection of the image of God, or created to be in the image of God, then a Christian ethic ought to start there. That should have an impact on how you treat refugee children at the border. Right? It should have an impact on how we view gender, and sexual identity, and so on. It should have an impact on how we see men and women working together, and being together, and so on. There's a lot of implications by saying human beings are created in the image of God.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 11:30

Right, and one of the correctives that [Migliore] does is there, too. Also in Genesis, [is wording] that is commonly translated as humanity [having] dominion over the world. [Migliore says] this is not about use of power. This is about compassion for creation. God created things to be in relationship, and in a compassionate way. That's what's being described when it's talking about what our relationship to creation should be, rather than as being consumers, users, that it's all for upholding our power, and our superiority in some way. That's another corrective to some of the ideas that people have used [to describe] being made in the image of God. Some people would say we're made in the image of God; therefore, we can create whatever we want, atomic bombs, or chemicals that destroy the world around us, or pollutions that disturb other creatures and ecosystems. It's a whole other way of saying, Who is it? Who is God? What does it mean that we're made in that image? It's not about us having more power, but it's about us loving better.

Tony Chvala-Smith 13:23

Yeah. So, the question, What are human beings? What are we? Who are we? A Christian theology can answer that question. With this picture of us, Christian faith has a very high view of the human person, right? We are created in the image of God to reflect this. Thinking back to our earlier podcast on the Trinity, to reflect the mutuality, the shared love, the interchange of the Trinity, human beings are created to reflect mutuality, interaction, respect, responsibility, reciprocal love. That's who we're created to be. That's a pretty exalted view of human beings. When you think about it, does that make sense to you, Carla?

Carla Long 14:24

It does. Hearing you speak, I realized that this is a really big conversation. I want to jump back. I don't know if you have time to talk about it, created in God's image, male and female, because I know a lot of people who consider themselves gender fluid. What does that mean for them? Are they no longer human beings anymore? I don't think so.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 14:54

Or are they even more so? We had a long conversation about this earlier, about some of the possible ways of understanding the idea that people are created in God's image male and female. So first, it reflects the idea that within God, those two terms are expressed. So that's one way of understanding it. But another way is to say that humanity was created, male and female, you could start to think about that as being in each person, male and femaleness, and there's some psychological, some Freudian and Jungian psychology, that would really stress the idea of the masculine and feminine. Those, of course, being very culturally constructed views of the time. But, to go along with that, if the idea is that within each of us is both male and female, that then creates this very long spectrum of what it means our gender identity is and there's all kinds of spaces along the way. So, the mix of male and female within people is different for different people. But the idea that both are resident in some way, within all of us, allows for a lot of different expressions of gender identity and I think also, sexual expression, sexual orientation. So, you know, it's all in how you look at it.

But for sure, of course, these are all ideas that the people who wrote down these ideas that are in the Old Testament could not have conceived of, I don't think. We're not saying that this is what they're saying, but we're saying if we want to let the Bible speak in our time, with a whole different cultural set of understandings of biology and science and of environmental circumstances, all those kinds of things, and language to talk about gender and sexuality, then we can look at this concept in the Old Testament, in Genesis, and say what's being said here is that in the creation, gender, it's not binary, it's not dualistic, it's not like male and female are separate worlds, but that they are in relationship to each other. It really does give us the possibility of saying . . . you know, I'm not sure if the listeners are familiar with some of the Jungian psychology where there's the masculine and the feminine. You know, in your dreams, you may have a woman have a dream about a masculine personality trying to, to force itself into her house, and in a Jungian approach, that might be seen as the masculine side of her wanting to be integrated into who she is. This is a psychological understanding that has been tried to be worked through in the last century or so. Using that kind of a background, the idea that there is in us both, then gives us, as Christians, room to acknowledge it actually gives us some biblical background to say that whole wide range is part of God's intent in creating humans.

Tony Chvala-Smith 19:36

To take that and go back to the Genesis text for a second, the Genesis text refers to God created humanity and the Hebrew word is adam. Adam is not a name. In the Hebrew Bible, adam is a description of a class of things, human beings. As the Old Testament scholar, Phyllis Trible once delightfully argued, you should translate it earth creature, because Adam is connected to the Hebrew word ADAMA, which means dirt. So, God created the earth creature,

male and female, but the text doesn't say male or female. Right? Charmaine mentioned that the authors in the sixth century BCE, when this text is written, they're not able to think in these kinds of terms yet. Nevertheless, they're still kept trying to capture something about human beings, that is, to be human is a combination.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 20:42

It's beyond one or the other. Right?

Tony Chvala-Smith 20:45

So, and this is very consistent in the Hebrew Bible. Even though there's lots of patriarchal stuff in it, generally, it's non dualistic, when it comes to humanity. That is, it doesn't make a sharp differentiation between, your physical nature and your spiritual nature. You don't have a body in the Bible, you are a body. And so, I think, what Charmaine is describing has a basis in the text of Genesis 1. All kinds of gender is a social construct, right? And yet the text is trying to say, as its author understood human being as male and female, that equals humanity, not male is humanity and female is lesser humanity or something like that.

Carla Long 21:42

How interesting. I love that Earth creature. So next time I talk to my really good friend Adam, I should just call him Earth creature..

Tony Chvala-Smith 21:49

Yes. Or call him dirt boy. I like it.

Carla Long 21:54

You know that I'll be happy to do that. You said that there's three ways to see human beings, created in God's image, sinners, and forgiven sinners. I don't know if you've already mentioned that, but you mentioned that to me. You might not have mentioned on the podcast, yet. I feel like we've talked a lot about created in God's image and what that means. Can we talk a little bit about what the word sinner means, because I hate that word.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 22:26

Understood, understood.

Tony Chvala-Smith 22:28

And I hate that I'm so good at it.

Carla Long 22:32

Tony, I actually heard you're an expert sinner.

Tony Chvala-Smith 22:36

I hear that word I coined earlier. I am a sucktacular sinner.

Carla Long 22:43

You are indeed my friend. Can we talk a little bit about what it means to be a sinner and if we have time to jump into those two nasty little words, original sin?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 22:56

Yes, that one. Good. Yeah, that would be a good one. Let's give a more accurate definition of what was intended by that term, and how it's been really misused in, I think, tragic ways in people's lives. But yeah, let's start with the idea that we are sinners, and what does sin mean. I think for lots of people, they haven't heard this said, but it's the implication of a lot of religious language that somehow being a sinner is breaking certain kinds of rules that God wants us to keep and that if we break those rules, we're putting ourselves outside of God's reach. In most really good theology, it is not accurate at all. We hear quite a bit in Community of Christ is the idea that sin is anything that separates us from God, or others, or from ourselves. It's those thoughts or actions or behaviors that are separating us from God or ourselves, it's not a prescribed list of things that if you do, you've separated yourself, but it can be a whole bunch of things. So that's, I think, a more generous way of understanding what it means that we are sinners, that we do things, we say things that create barriers between our ability to sense God, or to take in God's love for us, and affects our ability to have loving relationships with others, or with ourselves. A very short definition that Migliore uses says, to be a sinner is to deny or distort our created being. I'll say that again, to deny or distort our created being. So, if we are created in God's image, in the way we were talking about, our very essence is intentional on God's part. When we do things that do not value our worth, as a loved part of creation, that is sin. I like that because it values very highly what it means to be a created being, what it means to be known and loved by God. I think that's another place to go with it.

Tony Chvala-Smith 26:42

Yeah. I think that's a very helpful way to think about sin. Sin is unfortunately one of those words that has been co-opted by lots of popular religious usage and reduced in meaning to breaking a bunch of rules. In the best of classical Christian theology, and if you take the meta view of the biblical story, the word sin is trying to describe that these creatures who are in the image of God and beloved of God, often think and act in ways that deny that they are beloved, act in ways contrary to their own essential nature, as creatures of God. Christian theology sees this as a universal reality. Of course, it has cultural specifics on it. The Greek word for sin is a term from archery that means to miss the mark. If you think about it, if you've ever shot archery, Carla, it's shooting a target, and you shoot wide. The original sense of the term sin is that we were created in God's image, but we constantly seem to act in ways that are off target, so to speak. Migliore will want to insist, and Community of Christ will want to insist that even in

that, we are beloved of God, God loves us, and that this does not change the fact that we are in the image of God. It's an actual reality. One of the ways I like to talk about it is that we are created to reflect the love and reciprocity and compassion of God and yet, in so many ways, we're broken mirrors, we don't reflect it often in a very positive, very true way. And so, the idea of original sin in Christian theology is, at its best, it's trying to account for how is it that this distortion of our human being seems to exist everywhere?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 29:17

Yeah, the term Original Sin has been misused in lots and lots of places. And quite often, when people hear the term Original Sin, they think about a way of thinking about humanity that assumes that people are scum, that we're all scumbags, and that we're evil, nasty people and that we need something heroic to keep us from self-destruction. It's a very negative view that some people have when they use the term Original Sin, but the actual beginning idea of Original Sin is that we, human beings, are born self-centered. That's just a part of who we are. You don't have to be around babies very long to realize they are pretty insistent that certain of their needs be taken care of. As infants and as small children, we expect the world to revolve around our needs and our circumstances. As we get older, we hope that we become less insistent that the world revolve around us, that we become more aware to the needs of others, to become not just the receivers of love, but the givers of love, as well, and of care and of concern.

So, the idea of Original Sin is that this tendency that human beings have, this tendency of being self-centered, to be selfish, to want things to be revolving around us. I think any of us who've ever been in a relationship will find that we have to struggle with that, at times, that desire to be the center, to have things our way, to be comfortable, to receive love, all the time. I think that's a much better definition of what Original Sin is. It's not negative or positive, it's just describing what is typical of humanity. The need for having a word like that comes [throughout] history. As we look at all cultures, we look at all kinds of places in the world where the tendency is for war, greed, for individuals or countries to want everything to be about them.

Tony Chvala-Smith 32:31

Yeah, so why is genocide not a phenomenon of one culture only? And why is the abuse of power not a phenomenon of one culture only?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 32:45

Why does it cross all of humanity?

Tony Chvala-Smith 32:49

And why does the abuse of power cross gender boundaries, too? It's a constant human phenomenon. Why is it that human beings almost instinctively want to protect their own and

often oppress the weak and the marginalized and the outsider? And notice, there are these constant human tendencies that that are cross-cultural, cross-historical. And so Original Sin is, as a Christian idea, Christian symbol, is trying to say, all human beings are in this boat, we all have this profound tendency to be stuck on ourselves.

You know, now, St. Augustine, who had some very unhelpful things to say about original sin, for example, he's sometimes tried to connect it to sexuality. He also had some, I think, helpful things to say about it. The thing that Charmaine is describing, Augustine described as "love of self," and I'm not talking about positive acceptance of self, but when he used the phrase, "Amore, sweet love of self" he talked about this, this human propensity to be in love with our own self-interest, which I think works as a definition of selfishness. And, gosh, that crosses all kinds of sin.

The propensity of humans to be in orbit around our own self-interest is universal, and cross-historical. And so, Original Sin is a doctrine that's trying to capture that. Now, by the way, we do know that Joseph Smith, in that Wentworth Letter from 1842, I think, wrote, "We believe we're responsible for our own sin and not the sin of Adam." All right, well, he's part right and he's part wrong there. Yes, we are responsible for our own activities. But that statement does not account for it all. The fact is that we're not born and raised in some kind of ethical, empty slate, right? We're encultured, we are nurtured into these sorts of things. It's only a marginally helpful way of thinking about sin, I think. And so, Community of Christ theology has for 50 or 60 years, said sin is a universal phenomenon of shared human estrangement from our true being. I think that's a way to think about this again. Yeah.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 35:48

I like that. Yeah, say that again.

Tony Chvala-Smith 35:51

Sure. There is a universal phenomenon. It's shared across human experience, of being estranged, separated from our true essence, our true identity as God's children, as created in the image of God. Both things are simultaneously true, where we bear the image of God, and therefore are creatures of immense worth. At the same time, we're constantly estranged from that truth in ourselves and in our social life and in our religious life. Yeah.

Carla Long 36:27

I think we kind of recognize it. I know I recognize that, when I feel estranged from God (and I always know it's me), I have a picture in my mind of a yo-yo, and maybe I've said this before, like God is the finger doing the yo-yo and I'm the one going back and forth all the time.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 36:43

That's great. Yeah,

Carla Long 36:47

I think most people probably do. I hope. I guess if you if you're in touch with yourself, you know, when you're estranged, and when you're not. I wonder if that's where narcissism comes in play.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 37:05

When we are afraid to look at our own behaviors or our inner selfishness, and when we're unwilling to look at those things, then we can't see how those things separate us from our best self, from our relationship with God, from others. Yeah, narcissism is this unquestioned belief that we deserve a certain thing, or that we are better than everybody else. And actually, one of the ways that people avoid this idea of sin being those things that separate us from God, or those things that distort our best understanding of being created in God's image, is actually to go back to the idea of rules [where] we determine someone's value, or their closeness to God, by the fact that they can keep all of these religious rules. It's a way of not having to be self-aware and look at our own inner motivations towards self-love, towards selfishness, towards our tendency to manipulate so that we get what we want. So, rules are a really easy way to not have to look at that stuff because then we can just say, "Well, I didn't murder anybody today" and "I didn't sleep with my neighbors, whatever" and "I didn't covet too much." I think when people have rules, it's a great way to not look at what the root of this definition of sin is, which is that desire for more for us, whether that comes in greed, whether it comes in recognition, whether that comes in power over other people. I really appreciate you bringing that up.

Tony Chvala-Smith 39:24

So, I think a key aspect for us to bring across, and Migliore was certainly aligned with this, is that sin refers to a human tendency to reject or not accept, that we are beloved children of God. That's a whole different spin on sin, I think. (Charmaine: Say that again.) Sin is this human tendency to reject or not accept, that we are beloved children of God.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 39:59

And to tie in a little other piece is that the other, the other person, the next person is also a beloved child of God.

Tony Chvala-Smith 40:08

Oh, that's good. Absolutely. It has an individual and a communal, and then it has a cosmic element, that the good creation does not belong to God, is not beloved of God. In other words, when . . .

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 40:23

we act against it, we are saying it doesn't belong, it isn't created in God's image, as well.

Tony Chvala-Smith 40:29

If we treat it as if it's to be exploited by us, that's an expression of self-love, self-interest, and not an expression of it being part of the giant theatre God has created for us to be part of and to, to live in relationship in. So, sin has individual, and then a corporate, Charmaine mentioned, and then cosmic dimensions. Our current environmental, really big crisis is connected to our estrangement from nature. It's connected to our selfishness and greed and self-interest, and an inability to accept the needs of the other, whether that's other people or the world, sea turtles.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 41:23

Yeah, the Earth, the soil, the air, the water. Once we establish what it is that sin is, or isn't, that makes room for the remedy for that, and so that we can continue to try and live out that image of God, peace, and that we are forgiven sinners. That means that we're enabled by God's grace, God's love, to begin life anew, that we can keep turning. Repentance, the term for repentance, in Greek, Greek (Tony: and Hebrew), and in Hebrew, means to turn, to reorient yourself. The idea that God is through Christ, and through the Christ's life, ministry, example, resurrection, all of that, is creating new avenues for us to turn again, to turn back to God, to find new ways of doing, and that with the Spirit's help, we can retrain our hearts and our minds and our actions, so that they more take on the taste, the flavor of the kingdom of God. Our whole life is an opportunity to train ourselves away from our selfishness, our self-centeredness, towards an openness to God's presence in the whole creation, God's presence in the other, God's presence in our relationships, that we can have more capacity for love, more capacity for understanding and empathy, and care for all of creation. We can't talk about being sinners, without talking about being forgiven sinners, because that reminds us that being human means we're in relationship with God. To name this one aspect of humanity as sin, our selfishness, self-centeredness, we also need to look at how it is that God chooses to continue to be in relationship with us, even in spite of that. We see Christ in many ways being that reminder that we are invited to keep practicing this new way of being and that we're given images, whether it be of Christ or of other people around us or in history, who have taken steps towards self-awareness, towards self-forgiveness, then also committing to do for the other, for openness to the other, to learn from the other, rather than to assume superiority or betterness.

Tony Chvala-Smith 45:11

What Charmaine's saying is that you'd understand why logically, in Migliore's book, and in Christian theology, generally, the next topic is on Christology, on Jesus the Christ. So, we have been created for reciprocity and mutual relationship with each other, with creation, with God. We have a lot of ways of distorting that picture. For us as Christians, Christ is the lens by

which we can see a whole new way of being that frees us to live in that kind of new relationship, i.e., new creation. That's actually where Migliore will go more in depth in the next couple of chapters after this chapter. There's good news, there's bad news, and then there's even more good news. So, to state the even more good news here, I'll quote, or I'll refer to what I think is one of the most profound sermons in the 20th century, the sermon by the theologian Paul Tillich, titled, "You are Accepted." In that sermon, he articulates a lot of the stuff we're talking about, the sense of being estranged, and of finding ourselves, constantly messing up, or less than, and yet, nevertheless, this God who has created us, accepts us, and the journey of the Christian life becomes the journey of accepting that we are accepted, already. That's the even more good news, we are accepted, and thus empowered by grace, to live in a whole new set of relationships.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 47:05

Actually, I just had another thought. We might want to take this one out, but what if we thought about sin, as proving our own worth, and thinking about how what being forgiven is God reminding us, we already have worth, that in God's heart and God's eyes and God's love, our worth has never been doubted. And that we keep being invited to live out of our awareness of our worth, that God gives us in our lives. And sin is when we decide, we have to prove or exert our worth over other people. And we're not accepting our worth or the worth of other peoples as a given. It's something we feel like we have to force either on ourselves or on others. It's just another way of thinking about what sin is and how God sees us, is the remedy to our tendency to be all about proving our own worth.

Tony Chvala-Smith 48:30

I think that's actually a very, very profound way of thinking about it. So, I opt for keeping it in, Carla. (Carla: You got it.) I mean, if you think about it, for example, think about workaholism. And one of the root causes behind workaholism is the sense that you're not enough and you have to do more, do more, do more, be more produce more produce more to prove that you are of worth to somebody or some institution or some corporation. And think of the consequences that has on personal and family relational life, environmental life, too. And yet, what if you didn't have to do that to be worth something to God, you already were of boundless worth to God. In other words, the sin is in trying to prove something that you didn't have to prove in the first place. And so in that, trying to prove something that you didn't have to prove in the first place . . . (Charmaine: you make yourself the center). Absolutely. And there's usually a pretty big body count around that, too. Right. (Charmaine: Heart attacks . . .). Yeah, heart attacks, but then destroyed friendships and relationships and so on. That's just one example of what I think Charmaine has really insightfully described there. So we are accepted by the God who created us, in spite of our tendencies to distort and to be a fractured mirror. We are accepted in spite of. We see this in Jesus Christ. And thus, as human beings, we are empowered by that acceptance to embrace, not only our own worth, but embrace the worth of

others around us who are equally accepted, and then also to embrace our role in the cosmos as divine partners. Not that we're divine, but as partners with God in creating a different kind of world. So it's a, I think it's a really . . .

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 50:49

I was glad to hear you affirm that you're not divine.

Tony Chvala-Smith 50:56

Yes, yes.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 50:57

We would have a problem if you're starting to believe that.

Tony Chvala-Smith 51:01

Well, the idea of the divine-like human beings, that human beings are gods, is an idea that has created enormous evil . . .

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 51:12

over centuries, different centuries.

Tony Chvala-Smith 51:15

Yeah. World War I, for example. But that's a story for another time.

Carla Long 51:22

And World War II, yeah,

Tony 51:22

Yep. This is so.

Carla Long 51:26

We've talked about how we've been created in God's image, how we are all sinners, and how we are also all forgiven sinners. I could be wrong, but I see that forgiveness as pretty much instantaneous on God's side, but a little slower on the human side to maybe accept that forgiveness. I don't know if I agree with that or not. But that's how I see it.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 51:51

Absolutely. And I think it's even faster than instantaneous, because in some ways, it's pre-emptive. God's forgiveness is there before we even know to recognize the places where we're distorting our humanity. It's already there. In fact, this idea is personal, it's not just a set of ideas. As a young adult, kind of experimenting with life, I came to a point where I was feeling

very, very guilt and feeling far from God. Your yo-yo is a great image. I was way down at the bottom, and I was convinced that because some of the things I was doing are what I would consider, at that time, willful and things that I wanted to do, because I wanted to do them. I wanted to experience these things in life.

Tony Chvala-Smith 53:06

Oh, because you're not divine either.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 53:08

No apparently not. But anyhow, I really had a lot of guilt for the things that that I was doing, and the reasons why, and I really felt a long ways away from God. I heard a message on a Sunday morning by somebody who I very much respected and believed that they were someone who knew God better than I did. He said there are people here who feel like they can never be forgiven. And I thought, that's me. Then he followed that with God has already forgiven you. The reality of that was an actual physical feeling of a weight being lifted off of me. That idea that God's forgiveness makes a difference was tangible for me, and the lightness, and the new capacity to be loved, and to believe that I was loved by God, just opened up in me. That was a long time ago and yet, it's become one of those foundational things that I know about God. God's love is far bigger than anything that we can do or any barriers that we might put up. The idea of forgiveness of sins here doesn't require that the person be appropriately repentant and groveling or whatever people have in their mind, but that there be an openness to knowing that they are forgivable, that we are all forgivable, because we are all already loved by God. And God wants us to live from there, and so, is willing to help us remove the guilt, and those other barriers that keep us from knowing that we are fully loved. So, for me, that's huge. It's not just an idea. It's what has and does give me life.

Tony Chvala-Smith 55:51

And in a sense, an experience like that restores our own sense of personhood and possibility. And to go back, you mentioned earlier, Charmaine, the Hebrew and Greek words for repentance, especially the Hebrew word, to turn. It's interesting, because in that experience, you turned to receive what was already there.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 56:09

Yeah, that's true. And I didn't know it was there because I was still working with this idea that I had broken some rules and I was on the wrong side of the ledger sheet with God. I couldn't undo those things and that would stand as a barrier between me and God and that got swept away.

Tony Chvala-Smith 56:36

So, we human beings are wonderfully mysterious creatures and complex, totally complex, and capable of so much, both good and evil. We're capable of almost boundless compassion. At the same time, we're also capable of the most extraordinary forms of racism and evil towards others. We have to recognize this paradox of being a human and that you have to have some orienting point to think about what it means to be human. In Christian theology, Jesus Christ becomes an orienting point for us, both pointing back to our creation in the image of God, but also pointing ahead to what we can be in community as we struggle together for the reign of God on earth. So, it's a cool topic, Carla. Migliore's chapter is worth reading over and over again. It's really good. We can't obviously cover every aspect of it in this podcast. Anyway, what we've been talking about is theological anthropology. What do we mean by humanity? Who are we human beings? And what does it look like to view human beings from a, not from the, but a lens of Christian theology? So that's what we've been doing.

Carla Long 58:14

Well, I'm certainly blown away a little bit. It is hard to look at yourself and to do that study of yourself, the way you study God, or the way you study something else. It's because you have an intimate knowledge of yourself, but then again, you don't have an intimate knowledge of yourself. So, what an interesting way to think about it. It's like that meta thinking, right? Thinking about your thinking.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 58:40

Yeah, yeah. And actually, that's the role of spiritual formation, to take those times of quiet, of reflection, to look deeper, and to ask the Spirit to help you see more clearly who you are and where those places of self-love might be hiding out and where those places are. Sometimes it's recognizing the ways in which we distort our own humanity or others. Those are the places where we then can seek repentance, can find that freedom to know that we are loved by God. And sometimes spiritual formation reminds us that we are loved by God, which then leads us into self-awareness. That's one of the places where spiritual formation comes in because one of the purposes of spiritual formation is to take the time for self-awareness, to look inside, to become aware of what's happening in our feelings, in our thoughts. It's also a place where we reflect on what does it mean that God loves us? What does it mean to be in God's presence? Sometimes it's the experiencing of God's love or of God's presence, in those times of contemplative prayer or of stillness or in journaling, that we get to see what's happening in us. So, it can go either way. Spiritual practice can give us time to slow down and reflect and look inward and for us to see those places where we might be creating barriers between us and God, or us and other people, or where we're distorting our best humanity that then causes us to turn to God, to ask to see ourselves as we really are, to see ourselves as loved and forgiven, and to want to let go of some of those behaviors, or the other way around. Sometimes encounter with God in our spiritual practices helps us to look inside. But either

way, spiritual formation helps us to go to those other levels of our own humanity, our own reality, and invite God there or accept God's invitation to go deeper.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:01:23

Spiritual formation, as well as this kind of systematic theological thinking, leads us to certain social ethical possibilities if we really are going to take seriously, this idea, this belief, this conviction that human beings are created in the image of God, created for relationship created for mutuality, and for reciprocity. That ought to have consequences for how we how we see political realities, right? How we see other nations, how we respond to other nations, how we respond to other cultures, how we respond to refugees, and to other world faiths, and to other faiths, how we respond to illegal aliens, how we respond to people who are incarcerated, how we respond to, I mean, almost anything fits here. If you are created in the image of God, and if God accepts and loves you, then that really ought to have implications for how we act as a society, as a culture, how we act politically. So, there's varieties of wider implications for all of this, I think, Carla, for theological anthropology.

Carla Long 1:02:51

Absolutely, I completely agree. Gosh, thank you so much, you two, for sharing your wisdom with us on this subject that I've never thought about. Really. I mean, I have, and I haven't.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:03:07

Exactly.

Carla Long 1:03:09

I don't want to sound like I'm an absolute idiot. But sometimes there's a lot of different things to think about, like, what am I going to have for dinner? That's something very important for you to think about.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:03:21

Sometimes we reflected on the mystery of our being, and sometimes we reflect on what are we going to have on that pizza.

Carla Long 1:03:27

Exactly, exactly. But I really appreciate you both bringing up and talking about what you've been talking about. It's really important for us. Is there something that I missed that you want to share before we sign off?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:03:39

No, I think we've meandered around this, hit a few of them, have had a few interesting things, maybe not all the important things, but it's good.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:03:51

And so, I guess the only other thing is that for our next one, we'll be working with Migliore's chapter eight, "The Person and Work of Jesus Christ." And for those who are trying to read or follow with these, I would also recommend that you look at a statement Community of Christ has announced in its beliefs, called "We proclaim Jesus Christ." We sometimes refer to it as our Christology statement. It'd be a good statement to read alongside of Migliore's chapter. And that would be for next time.

Carla Long 1:04:20

That sounds great. All right, jumping on to chapter eight. And I think you said earlier, we're halfway through the book, right? We have 14 chapters, and this is halfway through.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:04:27

Yep. That's it. We can always add more items into a systematic theology. So, if we come up with some big gaping holes of things that we think also need to be part of it, we can do that.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:04:41

I guess, if we think about that geographically, Carla, we're in Independence, Missouri, and you're near Salt Lake City. And so right now, where we are in Migliore's book, we've just basically crossed the Kansas State Line into Colorado.

Carla Long 1:04:57

And what a beautiful place to be

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:05:02

You know, it's Oz, isn't it, Carla?

Carla Long 1:05:04

Amen, brother. Well, thank you so much you two for being on the podcast. I really appreciate it.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:05:11

Well, we appreciate you doing this. Take care. (Tony: Blessings.) (Carla: You, too.)

Josh Mangelson 1:05:16

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