

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

Hi, everyone, and welcome back to the Project Zion Podcast. My name is Carla Long, and I'm your host for Percolating on Faith, a series where we discuss matters according to faith and well, pretty much whatever else we want to discuss. I'm here with my guests, Charmaine and Tony Chvala-Smith. Hello, and welcome back.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith

Hello. Good to be here.

Tony

Hi, Carla. Nice to be back again.

Carla 00:55

Now, before we get started with today's podcast, though, I need to make mea culpa. In our last podcast, I said that Denver Snuffer calls Community of Christ, a watered down liberal, Protestant movement. And that isn't exactly what he said. Well, I remember the word Protestant and others I spoke to remember the word Protestant, he didn't actually call us Protestant. What he said was, "the second largest sect has so watered down its teachings and principles, that it can hardly be distinguished from any of the weak and diminishing liberal Christian sects. It barely gives lip service to Joseph or the Book of Mormon." So, while I apologize for the misquote, I actually do not apologize for the podcast because I think some really important information was given. And the podcast answered a lot of questions that we had been getting about, "is Community of Christ a Protestant movement or not?" So again, I wish I would have done my due diligence and getting the exact quote, rather than relying on memory. And that is 100% my fault. I am happy with the outcome of the last podcast and the information given. So I apologize. And Tony and Charmaine, they did nothing wrong. I told him that he said the word Protestant, but he did not. So that was entirely my fault.

Charmaine 02:25

No problem,

Tony

no problem here, still it was a really fun podcast to do.

Carla 02:29

So today, we're going to talk about theology and spirituality. And you might think, aren't those kind of opposites? I mean, theology is the study of God. And spirituality has things to do with the Spirit. And it just seems like they're they come from opposite ends of the spectrum, like, academia and mysticism

feel like they're kind of at odds. But I'm gonna guess that since we're going to talk about it in this podcast, that is not true.

Charmaine 02:58

Yeah, yeah. I think that perhaps the most natural way to look at both theology and spirituality, is that both are about both understanding and connecting with God. Because theology definitely is about the mind. But theology that is only in the mind is diminished, because it hasn't connected with the heart as well. And spirituality is not just about feelings, but it's about how we think about God, how we ask questions about who God is, and, and perhaps, who God isn't. But also, specifically, how do we connect with this living, expression of love? And so spirituality, still, well I would say spirituality depends on theology. And I would say that theology is best with when it's infused by spirituality.

Tony 04:02

And I really agree with that, that perspective. I mean, you could say, theology is faith seeking understanding. And maybe we could say, spirituality is faith seeking connection with God. And it's never been good for Christian faith when those two things have gotten significantly separated. So theology that doesn't aim additionally at the life of the Spirit can be really impoverished, and spirituality that is not interested in in theology, can also step over the edge in all kinds of weird ways.

Carla 04:56

Okay, so that's a really good start. I don't know how much you guys want to go deeper into that question though? Like, do you want to discuss more about what you mean when you when people say theology? And then what you mean when people say spirituality? Do you want to look more closely at those definitions?

Tony

Sure. I can start with theology.

Carla

And oh, I'm so surprised.

Tony 05:21

Yeah, sure. Why not? Why don't I take theology for 200, Alex. So theology is critical, thoughtful reflection on the Christian faith, for the sake of the church. So it's not armchair speculation. It's not making up stuff as we go along. Theology is a discipline of the church in which the church through people who are so gifted try to tries to think about and clarify its message, always bringing that message back to its center in Jesus Christ. So theology has different sides to it. There's a biblical side, there's a philosophical side, there's a historical side.

06:15

There's what's called a systematic or constructive side, we try to think of new implications of things believed. There's definitely an ethical side. And let me say, there's also there needs to be a spiritual side. So all of Christianity's greatest theologians, were also practicing Christians. That is they, they

were deeply immersed in the life of churches. And this doesn't matter whether they were traditionalists or progressives.

06:51

For example, the father of modern progressive Protestant theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher, was a preacher and deeply immersed in the life of the church. But then somebody like Thomas Aquinas, was a monk and a priest. And so that brilliant medieval theologian, had a life of prayer and worship. So spirituality belongs in, in and alongside of all the disciplines theologians do to try to understand and clarify and express the faith of the church.

Charmaine

Yeah, and as far as trying to give a definition of spirituality, I would say that, you know, the passage that comes in various forms, but loving God, with your might mind, heart, and strength, that all of those things have a spiritual side to them. We could just say, well, the heart part is, is the spirituality. But actually the mind part is part of spirituality as well, and the might and strength.

07:58

Because it's quite often our spiritual dimensions that give us the strength to persevere in difficult times, or in times where the theological questions are, seem too big for us, or the answers seem too foreign to us. So I would define spirituality, as connecting to God.

08:24

That that simple. And I would say, spiritual formation, which is a term that's been used in Community of Christ for probably the last 15 to 20 years, a lot more than it ever had previously. That spiritual formation is about intentionality, not just waiting for the next spiritual experience to happen, or hope that it might happen. But to recognize that, just as people are formed intellectually, by the things they learned, starting in grade school, and then you know, all the way through whatever their education might be, that we are also formed spiritually. And we can, we can be very careful about that, we can set out ways in which not only we ourselves can be formed spiritually, but how our congregations and our children and new members can be given practices, experiences, opportunities, to develop all these dimensions of relationship with God. And that that's really part of our role as a, as a community as a denomination is to help people go deeper in their relationship individually with God and as a congregation or as a group. And so spirituality is going deeper with God, connecting with God.

Tony 10:08

God in the Christian tradition, wants to be related to, and treating God and Christ and the Spirit as simply ideas, or things, misses a whole major point of the faith of the church, which is that God is an other, God is a vow, who encounters us. And, yearns for us to be drawn into relationship with God. And so that, you know, I like what Charmaine said, the spiritual life is about finding ways to open ourselves increasingly, and in a deepening way, into that relationship with God, who is the to relate to an earlier podcast God, who is the three-personed mystery, the community who invites us to the table and to fellowship in God's presence. So, I see theology and spirituality as really, very integral to each other, though they have different methods and approaches.

Carla 11:24

So what you're saying is that it sounds like to me, what you're saying is that theology and spirituality are not either or, you're not either an academic or a mystic, you are both and. Or in the best case scenario you're a both and.

Charmaine

Yeah, you know, I think these two sides of Christian discipleship, because I would say, being a theologian or doing theology is part of being a disciple. And the same would be true, I think, of spiritual formation, that that's just part of being a disciple. And that these two really can help each other a lot. In fact, as we were thinking about this podcast, I was thinking about what we call the four voices of theology. And we may have talked about this before, but sometimes it's called the Wesleyan quadrilateral. But basically, it's saying, there are four voices, or four aspects that are part of everyone's theology. And it names scripture and tradition, and reason and experience. So reason and experience, tradition, and scripture. Four different voices that are in everybody's theology, though, we may weight them differently. And, and so I was just thinking about that, and thinking that when we start talking about spirituality, a really good way to help our spiritual formation to be well balanced, is to use those four attributes, those four voices of theology, to talk about spirituality.

13:10

So you know, when we're looking at scripture, for instance, and talking about spiritual formation, what are the things that Scripture tells us, perhaps about Jesus' prayer life, or the ways in which Jesus connected with people or with the other attributes of God? How can we look at the prophets spirituality, of seeking justice, and righteousness? These are all things that would really help us go deeper in our understanding of spirituality. And then looking at tradition, when we're talking about spirituality.

13:54

And pulling from that really long, rich, deep history of the Christian tradition, both the Catholic tradition and the Protestant tradition that have had within them all kinds of ways that people have been, have found useful to keep connecting with God, and to keep the ego under check, and to keep our responsibility to each other in balance. And so that's another place where there's a lot of resources, they can kind of, I mean, the way that using tradition can be helpful is not to hold us and stick us in one place, but it can be sometimes a good balance to our fad driven, popular culture where you know, whatever the newest is the best. And so being rooted and anchored to that long tradition is very helpful in spiritual formation.

14:58

And then reason you know, the kinds of questions we ask about who God is, and where is God at work in the world, are the kinds of questions that expand our sense of, where the Spirit is at work, of our own connectedness, spiritually to the universe, to anywhere where God is. So, these are, you know, these are really important kinds of questions. And as much as they are theological questions, they are also very much spiritual questions. And then the other of the, those four voices I mentioned, is experience, and that's the one that is probably most essential in when we're talking about spirituality or spiritual formation, is our willingness to interact with a real and loving God. And that can feel very scary or make us feel vulnerable. But on the other end of things, it's also one of those places where we can,

16:15

if we're not careful, go seeking spiritual experience, and use it as an ego crutch. And so the experience part has to be balanced by those other three voices as well. So when, when we're tempted to let our spiritual life become something that we want to, you know, lift ourselves up above others. That's when we go back to some of the some of the mystics from, you know, the 12th or 16th century, who remind us that it's about God, it's not about us.

16:58

So, anyhow, there's lots of tools between the two disciplines that are really helpful to each other. So those four tools from theology, has just given me a whole other way of thinking about how do we keep a balance in our spirituality. So it's first time I really put it together. So thanks for the opportunity of thinking about this, Carla.

Carla

Oh, you're so welcome. I'm happy to help anytime.

Tony 17:27

I think Charmaine's analysis of the four voices of theology as they apply to the spiritual life and spirituality is really, really, really useful. If you think about Community of Christ and Restoration Tradition, experience has been so central. But of course, from our Community of Christ perspective, experience is exactly where, where this denomination, from 1820 on, got derailed so many times. And so bringing personal spiritual experience, into conversation with Scripture and, and with the resources of the Christian tradition. And also with reason, with rationality, you know, the question, what were you thinking, is a pretty good question to ask in spiritual life, as well as other areas of life too.

Charmaine 18:21

And, actually, I think, if I can kind of build, or maybe disagree just a little bit with Tony here and say that, actually, when we're talking about spiritual formation or spirituality, we're talking about something quite different from spiritual experience. And that's been a really helpful distinction for me to make, as I've been talking to groups, and working with individuals, because sometimes we have a sense that spiritual experiences that we've had make us spiritual, and somehow we're, it's because we are so good, that we have this list of spiritual experiences. And, and the reality is, is that spiritual experiences, and here I'm thinking about times when we have known the spirits peace, or times when we may have been in the presence of the healing Spirit of God, or times when we've sensed Christ presence or power at work in our midst.

19:35

These are not because of us. These are gifts from God. And our spiritual experiences are not things we've earned, or that make us better than anybody else. They are gifts and given because God is gracious.

19:54

So then, what I see is spirituality or spiritual formation, as being our intentional way of connecting with God. So whereas God is the giver of experiences, we say that entity that helped me recognize God's power or love or forgiveness or salvation, or hope, or whatever it is that God's presence has offered, is something I want to make pathways to. And that's what spiritual practices are, are those intentional pathways, taking time, taking focus, to spend, you know, maybe quiet time with God, maybe spending service, times in service, for the sake of God, not so that we'll get more spiritual experiences, but so that we are making more open doors in ourselves in our lives, in our problems, in our hopes, for hearing God's so in God's gift is the spiritual experiences. Our response to that is to open up the communication lines, and the spiritual practices are that loving God for God's own sake, not for what we get out of it. Wanting to stay connected to this power, that loves us and loves our enemy loves the trees outside our door, and the whole of nature. And spiritual practices are ways of, of opening ourselves to that God and being shaped and reshaped by that awareness. So that's kind of a distinction between spiritual experience and spiritual practice or spiritual formation.

21:57

You know, you probably have heard this too, it's kind of like sometimes when people get into sharing about spiritual experiences, there almost becomes this one upmanship? You know, like, well, I saw an angel. Oh, yeah. But I saw three angels, you know, and then it's all about who had the bigger or better experience, totally leaving in the dust, the awareness that God is the giver of these moments of spiritual insight or deepening.

22:32

And, and that needs to be appreciated. But then the focus is that it's about God, not about us.

Tony

And I think that this is something where the word theology really shares a lot in common with, with spirituality. That is the sense of intentionality. Theology at its best is an intentional response to what God has given. And the response of the theologian is to seek as much clarity as possible in the present moment, recognizing that, that any kind of way we have a formulating our experience, or formulating beliefs, the church will need constant revisiting and constantly reforming.

23:21

And so, you know, in a spiritual life, spiritual life is a journey. It's not a destination, it's like it's, there's a constant, a constant, peeling away the layers of the onion as we as we grow in, in our relationship with God. And the discipline of theology sees that too.

Carla 23:41

So that is incredible. I've already learned a lot about theology and spirituality. But I am actually kind of curious about where this idea came from, you know, like the idea that they were opposites in the first place. I have a feeling they weren't always opposites. So what about like the history stuff? And I know, Tony, this is some of your favorite stuff. So what's the history between theology and spirituality in the larger Church (capital C)?

Tony

Sure. I think, I think for centuries and centuries, these two things were not at all separated, but were seen as integral as part of an organic whole. So for example, in the fifth century, fourth and fifth century, a theologian of the stature of Augustine, is also a deeply spiritual person who has daily practices that he does, he's deeply immersed in the life of the church, but also deeply immersed in the life of prayer, and of reflection and engagement with his culture. It's all a unity for him. And then, you know, if we move ahead into the medieval period, I mentioned Thomas Aquinas.

24:53

Thomas Aquinas is a hero of mine, he may be one of the most incredibly rational thinkers of Western history. And yet at the same time, he was deeply mystical and had profound encounters with God. So, he did not see these things as separate. He didn't see theology, and spirituality as like two unrelatable disciplines, but actually as part of his whole life. So maybe I could say that what happened to this unity was that in the period we call the Enlightenment, in Western Europe, a kind of messy divorce happened between theology and spirituality.

25:45

So, the short version of the story is that in the Enlightenment, as reason, if you think about the four voices or sources of theology, as reason starts to trump everything in Western thought, the spiritual life comes to look kind of like an irrational, inner sort of thing that has no real bearing on math and science and discovery of new of new continents, has no real bearing on colonial conquest.

26:25

It has no real bearing on industrialization, all the things we associate with the rise of the modern age, tended to be connected with reason and rationality. And theologians in this period, were constantly fighting a battle to try to say, look, we're rational too we're really rational, we're as rational as all the other guys. And so what happened was that theology, particularly in Europe, had to try and distinguish itself as a rational discipline in order to make a space for itself in universities. And it became important for theology to be seen as what the Germans call a "Wissenschaft," a science.

27:14

So the more theology adopted modern ways of thinking, which I think it needed to, but the more adopted modern ways of thinking, the more it tended to push the spiritual life out of any kind of real relationship to theological thinking and reflection. That was the stuff they did at church or that was the stuff monastics did or that was the stuff weird Spirit spiritual people did, it wasn't the stuff that that rational, thoughtful, deeply critically minded theologians did in the university setting. So that's where the divorce got started.

27:57

What's happened though, especially in the last maybe 40 to 50 years, is a real recognition that this divorce actually impoverished theology. And, to some extent, it impoverished spirituality too. There was this recognition of a mutual need. And I can, I can speak for this on the personal side, as a theologian, where I became aware that my theological training was just not enough.

28:26



So after I finished all of my training, and I guess after I was able to be called “Doctor”, Charmaine and I were in a spot where, for three and a half years, we had no significant opportunities for employment, we were stuck. And it really became a spiritual crisis for me and a real moment in our relationship where we had to kind of find our roots and our source again, and discern our call together again. And so it's in that time, when I began to realize that my critical theological training was not going to be enough to get me through that part of that, that, that stretch of road in our life. And that's where I began, you know, with a lot of help from Charmaine and others to rediscover the Christian spiritual tradition, and to rediscover that theology and spirituality actually belong together. They never really should have been separated. So I found myself finding peace and comfort and new growth through reading mystics and figures from the Christian past. I didn't abandon my critical thought. But what happened was, I realized it was impoverished when it was by itself, and it needed a sense of heart sense of openness to God, that God has I made sure that God was not just an idea in the middle of a system of ideas, but that God was a real other, who didn't want just my brain but wanted the whole of me.

30:15

And so authors like authors like Brother Lawrence, 17th century Catholic; Francois Fenelon, another 17th century Catholic; Thomas a Kempis, 14th or 15th century Catholic writer; Evelyn Underhill, 20th century Anglican; William Temple, who has become one of my great landmark theologians, William Temple, who was a brilliant, brilliant theologian, but also deeply immersed in the spiritual life.

30:50

These figures began to reteach me. And so it's interesting that this was a personal journey for me. But now as I look back theology itself was going through a revolution, in which the spiritual life was no longer being treated like an ignorant, irrational second cousin, but in fact, absolutely essential for theology, to be truly grounded in a living God, and not just in a bunch of ideas.

Charmaine

And, and I think that, if we're open to it, we can hear where people are hungry for this combination of theology and spirituality. And I think the places where we hear it most honestly, well, at least in our experience, has been with young adults. And, in fact, the first time that I ever really did any, led any classes on spiritual formation, was when a young adult group back in Michigan asked if I would be willing to be their guest minister and talk about spiritual practices. And so I said, yes. And then it's like, oh, wait, oh, what am I going to talk about? And, and so it's like, I need to know what this means, I need to try this out, experience it, not just talk about it. And so, you know, I looked at Richard Foster's book, “The Celebration of the Disciplines”, and actually started a practice of trying these out in the time leading up to that retreat. And in that retreat, there was such an openness to these ways of connecting with God that weren't just hit and miss. You know, because we have this tendency to think, well, you know, camp was a great experience or reunion was a great experience, or, you know, special events were these great experiences where we meet God, but then in between is this huge desert, of no encounter with God, and sometimes a feeling of being deserted by God. And so I think, you know, it's often youth and young adults who see the natural connection, of theology and spirituality, in their own life, even as they are, you know, stretching beyond their childhood faith, their understanding and recognizing the empty places where they want to feel this with it with understanding, connecting to God.



So I think, you know, those are some worthy guides, the young people, the young adults, in our, in our midst, who are asking the right questions about so this God, what do we know about this god? What does it mean to be in relationship with this God? And so, you know, the things that we learn at those high moments are the things then that spiritual formation or spiritual practices focuses on, you know, in those moments when we've known God's love in our lives, when we have felt more complete, perhaps than we've ever felt before, when we know our worth down to our core, even if it's just for a moment, those are the basis of what we want spiritual formation is about. And it's those places where we go into times of prayer. And we take with us those, we remind ourselves of those moments, and what they told us about who we are so spiritual formation is about reminding ourselves who we are to God. In the process, we're reminding ourselves of who God is, and that God is near and is as near, as some have said, "God is as near as our own breath." And so focusing on spirituality allows us to stop, to slow down to focus on how near that is. So, that's, I think those are some of the places that that we get challenged to, in a very natural way, explore the spiritual side of things.

Carla

Well, sure. And you talked about young adults and young adults now are willing to question everything, am I wrong? Like they're questioning everything. And so like a theologian in my mind, a theologian, if you're just a straight theologian, all you do is study, and that's it, right? Like, it's really hard to, to be vulnerable, you know, you need to have answers and answers are the most important thing and you can't be wishy washy. And so, you know, it makes you, it forces you to kind of be like more open and say, well, maybe I don't actually know everything about everything.

Tony

That can certainly, that can certainly happen if you reduce theology merely to the academic side. And then what you forget is that we're dancing around a live mystery, and that this mystery is infinitely deep. And so, we have to be really circumspect, you know, self aware of, of our tendency to want to bottle that mystery up into some kind of, you know, convenient collection of phrases. I think, critical theology must ask questions, but at the same time, in order to be really good critical theology, it also has to be still sometimes, and sit worshipfully, before the infinite, boundless mystery that God is, and practice being silent.

Charmaine

And I think some of the questions that theology asks are not best to answer it in words, or concepts, or clever ways of thinking. But in awe, in recognizing that God is more than we are. And so sometimes those questions are not so much about the search for an answer. But for the recognition of a presence, that is beyond our ability to capture, to constrict with our words, or ideas or teachings or beliefs.

Tony

There's a principle of the Christian spiritual life, that I actually first learned from a theologian, the one I mentioned before William Temple, who was the Archbishop of Canterbury during World War Two. And somewhere in one of his writings, he mentions this principle. And then subsequently, I found it in lots of even older Christian writers. But Temple says, "we become like what we worship." And so, the great calling and value of theology as a critical discipline, is to be sure that we're not worshipping wrong things. You know, theology is faith seeking, understanding, its faith seeking cogency, rationality,

credibility. It's so easy to turn all kinds of false ultimates into Gods. And so that's one of the tasks theology can do for the church. At the same time, on the spiritual side of, say, the spiritual side of theology, is the worship side, right, we become like what we worship. And, and so, spirituality seeks this encounter, seeks constantly to place, the spiritual disciplines are ways we place ourselves before God the mystery in worship.

So you see how the two things work together, we want to be careful that we're not placing ourself before the wrong thing. This happens in our contemporary life, certainly the United States, lots and lots of people placed themselves before the false god of American nationalism. And that is not something that, that's an idol. And it's something we want to not actually become like. And so instead, we want to worship the God whose very essence is love, so that we can become increasingly loving people. So that's a way that these two things, these two dimensions actually work together.

Charmaine 39:43

Right. And I think as I think about some of the separateness, I think sometimes some kinds of theology can create barriers for spiritual maturity or spiritual depth and you know, I think, I mean, I can think of different ways that that's happened, where some people, or some groups become suspicious of the mystical or suspicious of certain kinds of gifts of the Spirit, even ones that are, you know, offered in very responsible ways. And that there's this somehow the sense that our feelings are not to be trusted. And that spirituality is all about just our raw feelings. And so I think theology can create open doors for spirituality, or it can make us suspicious or judgmental about it. So I think that's, it's worth acknowledging that.

40:53

And actually, it also reminded me, just as what Tony was talking about, is of a saying that I had heard, and it's one that's just been used in, in various ways, but I thought it was really insightful. It says, "If you want to know what someone's theology is, listen to them pray."

41:18

And, you know, that's something we can do for ourselves, too, is to become aware of what is it that we are praying about or for, and that may reveal some things about our own theology, but it may also help us see some places where we want to go deeper, spiritually, and theologically.

41:43

You know, are we holding on to some of our religious prejudices that we assume that God has too?

42:02

Are we tied into rote kinds of prayer that don't give room for what our hearts deepest desire is? Or our deepest gratitude? Are we letting our prayer lead us into deeper spiritual life? Or are we letting it remain stagnant? So those are just some ways in which theology and spirituality can kind of be checks to each other kind of checks and balances, to say, you know, what, where's this pointing to needed growth in me?

Tony 42:43

Yeah, I mean prayer is at the heart of the Christian life and, so just to kind of riff off of what Charmaine is saying here: we can get stuck in patterns of referring to God in one particular way, all the time, that actually, kind of restrain our spiritual life. If we only think of God in terms of male imagery, it can really actually prohibit or inhibit our spiritual growth. Theology as a discipline can help us to see, for example, that God language as we use it in the Christian tradition, is metaphorical. It's symbolic, it's ontological, there's not just one symbol or metaphor, that is the kind of be all or end all when referring to God. God is infinite being. God is, as Thomas Aquinas says, "Being itself", or, as Paul Tillich says, "the ground of all being." And so those kinds of images can then kind of shake us loose in our spiritual life to approach God in other ways to open ourselves to other dimensions of God.

So these two things, these two, what do I want to call these? It's like, we're looking at the same thing from two different angles, but it's still the same thing we're looking at, from the theological side from the side of spirituality, trying to open ourselves increasingly to this reality that has claimed us and grasped us and called us children.

Carla 44:28

Oh, wow. You know, I appreciate that a lot. And it also kind of terrifies me a little bit if I'm going to be completely honest, especially the part Charmaine where you said if you want to know someone's theology, listen to them pray. Ah, that's a little bit terrifying. And you know, when you, sometimes when I say a public prayer, sometimes I'm like, they're probably not listening anyway.

Charmaine 44:55

Aha, now some will. And you will.

44:59

I'm certainly gonna start listening.

45:00

Oh, so be careful people at the Salt Lake City Community of Christ congregation I'm going to start listening. I mean, I have been before, just so you know.

Charmaine

I just was going to say, when we're getting close to the end, I'd like to just lead us in a short prayer practice that kind of put some examples on to this.

Carla

That sounds great. I'd love that say that.

Charmaine

We'll pop it in near the end. So what were you going to say?

Carla

Okay. Well, I was just going to say, since we've discussed, like the larger church, you know, like how the larger church has changed over the years. I mean, saying "capital C" the large Christian Church, what about Community of Christ? How have we started looking at theology and spirituality and having them come together? Because I definitely see it happening and Community of Christ.

Charmaine

Oh, absolutely. And I think that was one of the reasons why I wanted to make that distinction between spiritual experience and spiritual formation, as we talk about it now. Because the sense that the Spirit is involved, and that we want the Spirit to be involved, I think has been there since the beginning of the Reorganization. And, and before that, too.

And, you know, when we do when we use the old preaching charts to help people understand what our theology used to be, one of the first things that's on those charts is the acknowledging of the spiritual gifts that are mentioned in the New Testament, and how much the church, at least in that time, really valued the spiritual gifts. And, and I think, valuing those spiritual gifts, expecting them being open to them, created within our DNA as a movement, this sense that it's more than ideas, it's more than a list of beliefs. Even at times when we thought it was all about what beliefs you had, like what were what glory you were going to end up in. But I think the experience of the spiritual created in us, our rich ground, and, you know, whether intentionally or not church members, I think it was intentional, I should, I should go back on that. The Disciplines of prayer of fasting, of intercessory prayer of prayers of administration.

47:40

Those were and have always been really important in our denomination. And so we had those ready, starting places within our movement, and people like Carolyn Brock, and even before her people like Velma Ruch. And even before her people like Arthur Oakman, and F. Henry Edwards, who were very theologically minded, but also very spiritually minded, started helping members go deeper into things like, "What can it mean to suffer, knowing that Christ suffers with us?" And not just as mental exercise, but to sense and trust Christ's presence with us in our suffering, inviting Christ's presence.

So that that's, that's part of our, our history of, of wanting to utilize our feelings, as well as our minds. And then within the last 15 years, again, people like Carolyn Brock, who was formally educated in spiritual formation, and guiding others in being formed spiritually, followed that sense of call and equipped herself. And church leaders saw that this was, this was what the Spirit was calling us to as a church. And so spiritual practices have become not just personal practices, but have become practices for the whole church. And really easy examples are the last two world conferences and the USA conference in 2013, where as part of our conferring together, we would take short times to refocus on God's presence in our midst, and we just called them moments of blessing.

50:00

And in those times together, we might take a few moments of silent focus on God. We might sing a part of a hymn or a song that was relevant to where we were in the conferring, we might have a kind of

prayer offered or invite people into listening to a poem. But all of it was again, refocusing on, how is God with us, how is God in our midst as a body?

50:44

At the conference in 20...20..., maybe it was 2013, or 2010, we had some spiritual practices together, that included long periods of stillness and quiet and of listening to God, which for some people, I'm sure was uncomfortable. But I was surprised at how still the conference chamber became, after this practice, after we'd been doing this practice for a day or two, taking some long moments of discerning together, and how, what the sense of peace was in our midst, as people rested in the Spirit, and trusted together, what God was doing in our midst, and in our minds and in our hearts.

51:48

And so, I think things like that have made it really so much more. It's not just a nice feeling, or a nice idea. This is real, this shapes who we are as a people. And in the last three years, we just finished our third year, a group of about 50 participants, and a staff of 10 or 11, have gone through a spiritual formation and companioning program, where we met twice a year, for several days, and with the intent of equipping church members to be spiritual formation ministers in their congregations and mission centers, to help bring this kind of depth in our worship, in our interactions with each other. And the response was amazing. And we're starting a second cohort.

52:50

Actually, applications are, are being accepted even now as we speak, for the spiritual formation, companioning program.

Tony

So what Charmaine has described is, is what I call a "both-and." That is, in recent years, Community of Christ, like other parts of the of the Christian tradition, has discovered that theology and spirituality belong together, it's "both-and."

53:18

The only thing I would add is that, in that period, from the 1960s, to, you know, maybe the 1990s, when we were going through our very careful and painful, critical rethinking of ourself as a denomination, the kind of theology that we needed to use, sometimes could actually get us in that divorce space where theology and spirituality kind of get separated. And that did, that happened. But in some ways, though it was painful and costly, we had to be kind of shaken loose in different ways from where we had been for 100 years from 1860 to 1960 theologically. But we just couldn't stay in that critical moment. And so the recovery of the "both-and" has been so important for the church's health and vitality, and for a sense of wholeness.

54:29

So, theology as we practice it today in the church, whether it's in the spiritual formation program that Charmaine is talking about, whether it's in Community of Christ seminary, whether it's in say, for example, the theology formation team, we are very conscious of the need to, to blend worship and spiritual practices with critical thinking and deep reflection on issues facing us.

54:56

We just we've got to avail ourselves of every possible means of grace at our disposal, so that we can be as open as possible to what God is doing with us and what God wants us to become. So we are in a, I think, a really creative time right now when, you know, for example, when our seminary students, when we make sure, for example, when we're teaching, ancient medieval theology, that they're not just learning about it, but they're also learning how to join with medieval mystics in prayer and how to encounter these great Christians insights in ways that can speak to postmodern people. I think it's really important we bring all these things together into a kind of holistic picture.

Carla 55:48

Well, that sounds wonderful. And it sounds like certainly an organization that I want to be a part of, and I'm glad I'm a part of it. So, I was wondering if you either have you had any ideas about, you know, like, best case scenario, moving into the future and Community of Christ. Like, what could it look like to continue to meld these two together and to help people understand that one, without the other is not as good as they are together?

Tony

I have one potential scenario, that's kind of exciting to me. And this is taking the long view backwards, that many of the great movements for human wellbeing for justice, for creating different kinds of societies and worlds, have happened because people have been both critically thinking and spiritually attuned. And so as, as we have felt this deep call as a church to become a community devoted to peace and justice, one scenario is that, especially as young adults, and millennials, who connect with the church, experience this sort of holistic vision of deep spiritual practice, and careful theological reflection, that we'll increasingly be creating generations of disciples, who are not afraid to stand up to all kinds of injustices in society, because they're deeply rooted in God.

57:26

I, you know, one of my favorite Martin Luther King sayings is the saying, I might paraphrase, I might get a little wrong, where he says that, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." I love that saying, and some of the some of the greatest workers for justice in the Christian tradition have also been deeply engaged in spiritual practices, as well as theology. And so one scenario for me is that we can become a kind of church that, that produces those sorts of people, who are rooted in God. And because they're rooted in God, and learning to think critically about that, know how to engage society in really transformative ways.

Charmaine 58:14

One of the things that I see is, is really probably even just a bit closer than that. And it has to do with division within our culture, that is, the divisions along political lines, the division sometimes along age lines, the divisions over issues, or ways of thinking about the world. And one of the, one of the great gifts that spiritual formation brings is this awareness that God is not my "pocket God" that I get to decide what you know, what God is like, and what God will do and how God sees things. But spiritual formation necessarily makes God bigger than us, and our ideas and thoughts. And in that reality, then we become aware of God's love for us individually, but for the person next to us as well. To those who

we might see in some venues as our enemies, as those who think differently than we do, or are moving towards different ends politically or socially.

59:37

And so becoming grounded in God's love, which, again, I would say that's pretty basically what spiritual formation is about, creates this other dimension on which we can connect with others, whether they're there or not, doesn't matter, but our awareness of God's love for all of creation for each one, independent of our particular ideas on particular topics, is a great gift, in a time when walls are being built between people and ideas and parts of the nation. And, and, and give us this other avenue altogether, to be brothers and sisters, to be caring parts of creation, that want something that God wants. And so I think it has some very practical possibilities in our inner life as we look at the differences and the conflicts around us.

1:01:00

It gives us another way of seeing each other and seeing God's Will over at all, and, and trusting that God's love brings a kind of equality, that nothing else in the in our world can. So I see some people who are very involved in spiritual formation, and whose concern in the last while has been how can I be more open to God so that I can get past my reactions to others who think differently than me? And I think that's a really practical place to put spiritual practices to work, to invite God into those hard places in us those angry places. Those places that want to win or to have only our view of reality visible. I think it's a really important place that this kind of inner work and work and community can bring a kind of peace.

Tony 1:02:20

Just a couple of possibilities there.

Carla 1:02:24

Definitely some cool possibility. So we're coming close to the end of our podcast. And I think, Charmaine, you wanted to maybe lead us in maybe a prayer practice that maybe explains what you've been talking about.

Charmaine

It's just a very simple prayer practice. That's called a breath prayer. And I like breath prayers, because that whole saying that, you know, God is nearer to us than our own breath, I can't help but think of that whenever I stop and focus on my own breathing. And so that's what I'm going to ask us to go right now is to just in stillness.

1:03:03

In a spot where you're comfortable sitting is to simply focus on your breath. As you breathe in, breathe in fully. And breathe out. Let your mind focus on the air coming in and going out. And just rest in that awareness for a minute or two.

1:03:46

Breathe in and breathe out.



1:03:53

Fine to let your breathing go back to its natural pattern, but still pay attention to it. Because as we breathe in, we will say to ourselves, I breathe in God's love. So as you breathe in, breathe in God's love.

1:04:31

And now, add to that that as you breathe out. Just imagine that your breath out is those things that God's love displaces. So, breathe in God's love.

1:04:52

Breathe out those things that God's love displaces.

1:04:58

And just name them if you want to. Might be fear, might be frustration, might be sadness. Whatever it is that God's love in your life displaces or dispels on your breath out, imagine breathing it out.

1:05:19

Now just spend a couple of minutes focusing in breathing in God's love. Breathing out what God's love displaces.

1:06:23

Gracious God, giver of life and breath. But especially giver of your presence known to us in love. We thank you, for life for breath, but more importantly, for your desire to be with us, and to guide us in this adventure of life, with your Spirit, with Christ present. Amen.

Carla 1:06:59

Thank you, Charmaine, I appreciate that very much.

Charmaine

Thank you, Carla.

Carla 1:07:04

So we've come near the end of our podcast for today, are there any final closing thoughts that you might have that you wanted to mention and didn't get a chance to?

Charmaine

I have one little one. And that is that when it comes to spiritual formation, the idea of the Trinity multiplies. Because one of the beauties is that there are some people who identify with Christ or Christ spirituality, others who may identify more easily with the Spirit or spirituality, others with Father, others with the idea of source or with God as an inclusive term. And so I think that's one of the fun things actually, about spiritual formation is that there's all these open doors to God, and exploring them, trying on some new things that might be feel a little strange or awkward, can actually deepen our

understanding of who God is, as well as who we are. And that was one of the things I kind of wanted to toss in there.

Tony 1:08:25

And I think one, one thing I would just simply add is that we need to be able to pray our theology. And we also need to be able to critically think about our spirituality. Right, so I'm kind of switching, making alternates there.

Charmaine 1:08:45

Nicely done.

Carla 1:08:47

Yeah, I appreciate that. Well, thank you, you two, again, for a wonderful podcast, one that has certainly opened my eyes. And I hope that has kind of open the mind of some other people as well, you know, to think in different ways about theology and spirituality and how important they are together and to each other, as you know, and so I appreciate your thoughts.

Tony

And we appreciate you guiding us through this discussion Carla, thank you so much.

Charmaine

Yes, thank you.

Josh Mangelson 1:09:17

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