

Episode 84- Percolating on Faith – Why Jesus

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SPEAKERS

Tony Chvala-Smith, Carla Long, Josh Mangelson, Charmaine Chvala-Smith

Josh Mangelson 00:22

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Carla Long 00:53

Hello and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla Long, and you're listening to the series Percolating on Faith, where we discuss theological matters, and pretty much whatever else is rolling around in our brains. Lucky you, listener! As always, I'm here with my friends and colleagues, Charmaine and Tony Chvala-Smith. Welcome back you two!

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:16

Hi, Carla.

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:17

Hi, Carla.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:18

Good to be here.

Carla Long 01:19

Today, you know, we're not really going to talk about anything that special. In fact, I don't even know if our gentle, loving listeners have even heard of this guy. Do you guys think they have? It's a pretty small topic. Not a big topic at all. It's all about Jesus Christ! Yes, today we're going to be discussing Jesus Christ, which is not a small topic at all, which is a huge topic, right, Tony? Right, Charmaine?

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:47

Absolutely. This is probably the central topic in Christian theology.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:52

In more ways than one. It's the heart of Christianity.

Carla Long 01:57

So can our listeners expect a three hour podcast today? No! I think it's really important that we're talking about Jesus Christ, and there's so many different ways that we can talk about Jesus, right? Like I know that Jesus has been studied for the last 2000 years or so. Lots of books have been written about him, including books way back when, but today we're going to be talking about Jesus in three broad categories. And Tony, Charmaine, what are those categories we're going to be talking about when it comes to Jesus today?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:35

One of them is Jesus as God with us.

Tony Chvala-Smith 02:40

And the second one we'll deal with is Jesus as example, primarily in the synoptic gospels Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:47

And then the other is Jesus as the bringer of peace and equality. We thought those would be three categories that might not be the first things that come to people's minds, but they are very, very deep, both scripturally and theologically within Christianity.

Tony Chvala-Smith 03:09

And also, well, these categories only kind of begin to scratch the surface of the wider field of Christology. One of the reasons we want to deal with them is that in some respects, all three of these categories are potential answers to the question "Why Jesus"? Why is Jesus important to the church?

Carla Long 03:30

I hope this is okay to mention this here: listeners, if you have questions about Jesus, and something that we don't get to in this podcast, we welcome all questions. And maybe this is just the very first of a couple of podcasts about Jesus, and especially if there's something that you would like for us to explore. So, while you're listening to this podcast, think about some questions you have for Tony and Charmaine. Not so much for me, but for Tony and Charmaine. So let's just jump into it. Do you want to jump into that number one category, Jesus as God with us? Like, what is it about God with us? Why is that important?

Tony Chvala-Smith 04:07

Yeah, sure, we are happy to jump in on that one. So the title 'God with us' comes specifically from Matthew's gospel. Matthew's gospel starts with Matthew's version of the nativity, in which a text from Isaiah is used as an illustration or prophecy regarding Jesus' identity as Emmanuel, which is Hebrew

for 'God is with us'. And interestingly, that gospel ends with the risen Jesus telling his disciples, I will be with you. So the thrust of that whole gospel is Jesus as the presence of God in the world, who abides with the disciples even after his death. So why is that important? Well, one could say that all the various books of the New Testament are written with some kind of conviction that Jesus brings God's presence near in a very distinctive and unique way. And that that presence continues to stay with the church from that point on. I had a friend once who referred to Jesus as the human face of God. And I think that's a really important way to think about this. Because the term God by itself can be filled up with all sorts of meanings. Some of them just from cultural baggage, some of them from negative experience. And so the term God by itself doesn't always necessarily mean anything specific. But Jesus, as God with us, helps us begin to see what the term God actually can mean.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 06:00

Yeah. And as much as the earliest authors in the New Testament were trying to find words for who Jesus is, we see them struggling with the concept of who is he and what does his presence mean? And what does it do? What does his death, his resurrection mean? What does it say about who he is? And all of that early struggling, all of those early names and titles that were given to Jesus really, I think, became the fodder, the materials from which the later idea of the Trinity develops. And so the idea that Jesus is an aspect of God can be seen back to the earliest writings of the New Testament, though they're struggling to figure out how do we talk about this. Many of the authors were coming from a good grounding in the Old Testament, and many of them from the Jewish tradition, where there is only one God. So talking about who Jesus is, back then, and then in the first centuries of Christianity, was very important. Because who he is, it's important not just because of some need of talking about him or about his relationship to God or him being God, but to be able to pass on the truths that we know about who Jesus is with us, as well as who Jesus is as God. So it's important.

Tony Chvala-Smith 07:56

So another thing to say about this is that, in the gospels, you can see that Jesus comes across to the disciples and to the people of this time as a giant question mark. And that question mark is summed up with a question, Who is this? And even the disciples ask that question. There's a wonderful scene in the end of Mark chapter four, where the disciples and Jesus are in a boat at sea, and a storm erupts on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus is asleep in the stern of the boat on a cushion. The disciples, of course, are freaked out by the storm. And they wake him up, and he calms the storm. And the next thing that the disciples say is, Who is this, that both the wind and the sea obey him? And so, if you think about that in relation to their understanding of their own Jewish tradition, and the Hebrew Bible: water, wind, storm, calming the sea, all of those elements are found in the Hebrew Bible in the creation story and in the exodus story. And so this is a puzzle. This is the man who has called them, they know he is a human being. At the same time, he presents them with this sort of definitive claim, in his very actions, that he is something more than that. And so 'the God with us' theme is all through the gospels, often coming to the reader in the form of the question, Who is this man who presents us with this stark and definitive claim about who he is and what he's connected to?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 09:54

And I think one of the most important things about the whole idea of 'God with us' is to keep reminding ourselves that part of Jesus' promise to his first disciples, what the church - meaning the whole

Christian tradition - has believed and held to and lived from and then vindicated in believing is that Jesus is still with us, and that God's desire in Jesus, in Christ, was to make God's own presence available to us in a much more readily accessible way. And that Christ is here with us in this time and age in ways that may be a lot harder to understand than his first disciples' following him around in the countryside, but testimony in the long tradition, throughout the long Christian story, is that in a multitude of ways Christ is present with us, whether it's help in times of uncertainty and grief, sometimes in bringing us peace in the midst of turmoil, in giving us help when we are trying to change behaviors and habits, enlightening our mind, reassuring us that we are loved, all of these kinds of experiences are evidence of God with us and Christ present with us.

Tony Chvala-Smith 11:45

On that experiential note I would say for myself that Charmaine and I have taught theology for a long time and had the opportunity to travel around Community of Christ worldwide, and get to meet people and listen to their experiences and questions and struggles, and you know we encounter lots of people for whom God makes perfect sense and Jesus doesn't make sense. I have to say, in my experience I understand that, but I'm almost the exact opposite. That is, apart from the Jesus story the idea of God doesn't make sense to me. When I say personally Jesus is God with us, for me the biblical picture, the portraits of Jesus we have in the gospels, and the church's long experience, and my own experiences with Christ are what makes the idea of God even credible to me at all. I might have a chance to say more about that later.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 12:52

And I think that sometimes who Jesus is gets really shortchanged, because there's one aspect of Christ with us that's often put under the title 'salvation', that gets a very narrow definition of what it means that Christ is God with us. And people maybe point to one particular time where they in some traditions would say [were] 'born again', and then that's the entry into this relationship with God, and that's maybe it with how we're going to continue our journey, or not, with Jesus. And in fact, I think that is one of the hesitations within our movement to talk about Jesus, is the fear of sounding like another denomination. Jesus all and only about his blood on the cross is what brings us salvation, or his death - he died for us and our sins. And though that's a valid expression of who Jesus is, sometimes that's all that he gets to be, and I think there should be an essence within our movement, as I said, to talk about Jesus, because we don't want to minimize who Jesus is, but we also don't know what else to talk about Jesus. So I think even the idea of God with us, God's redeeming, God's desire for salvation that you can see way back in the very beginnings, the oldest stories in the Old Testament, you know, yes that brings through part of who Jesus is as God for us, but there's more there as well.

Tony Chvala-Smith 15:02

Interestingly that perspective on Jesus Charmaine is talking about, which is kind of the default setting in American religious culture, turns out to be - against its own claim - not all that biblical. It's a single little slice out of the New Testament. This is the Jesus of the born again experience. In the name of Jesus, you'll be saved, and you'll be okay. You'll have eternal fire insurance. And that's it. Actually, the New Testament is profoundly rich with different meanings that are related to who Jesus is and what Jesus brings. And so that tradition that claims to be biblical is biblical only in the very narrowest possible

sense. There's so much more that can be said about what Jesus says, and so many other ways to experience him.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 15:59

And I think another thing that happens within the Community of Christ and RLDS history was that we had kind of minimized Jesus to just a functionary, somebody who just came and did something, so that things can move along. And in our history, we tended to just talk about Jesus's coming to establish the kingdom, and though he was very present in the sacraments, I think [that was] primarily because we borrowed our sacraments from other Christian movements that were before us. We didn't have a lot of ways of talking about him in our own short history, when we basically saw him as being the one who came to establish the church, put the church back on earth. So we have a deficit there as well.

Tony Chvala-Smith 16:58

And that deficit is something Community of Christ theology has been working on for about the past 50 or 60 years. I would say our Christology has become ever more broad and full, and has a lot more points of contact, a lot more to offer, than it would have had 50 or 60 years ago.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 17:20

In fact, we would recommend for people to take a look - and I don't know, Carla, if you can maybe make a link to this - but the *We proclaim Jesus Christ*, it's a statement that's in *Sharing in Community of Christ*, and it's a work of a committee. That was probably in 2000...

Tony Chvala-Smith 17:45

This was 2006.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 17:47

...that this came out, but it'll help you see where we've been trying to go as far as talking about the church's understanding of who Jesus is, and what it can mean for us. So please take a look at that. I think it'll be a rich resource for you.

Carla Long 18:07

I really appreciate these things that you have been talking about, because in so many circumstances, I hear about - oh I really hate the term - fire insurance, and how Jesus, you only have to say you love Jesus once, and you're not going to burn in hell, or whatever. And I appreciate that you talk about that's just a narrow way of looking at Jesus and thinking about Jesus. It's so easy to fall into that trap, I think, because it is pervasive in the United States.

Tony Chvala-Smith 18:42

Yeah.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 18:43

I think so too. And before we go into the idea of Jesus, as example, I started a little exercise this morning, just before we started talking. [It] was to start to go back through some of the New Testament books, and to see some of the names for Jesus. I think just hearing some of these helps us realize how

much we lose if we only see Jesus as one thing, whether it's the one who somehow is our passport to heaven, or our ticket through the flames, or whatever. Or just the one who just established the church. I think, either way, we're missing a lot. So, I'm going to just read a few of these and Tony can jump in, too. If we were to just start looking with Paul, who is the earliest of the writers of books that we have in the New Testament, some of the terms he uses are Son of God, Giver of Grace. He talks about how we have righteousness with God, we have right relationship with God through faith in Jesus. Son of man, life-giving Spirit, Peace with God, Wisdom of God, Reconciler, Redeemer, the weakness of God and the power of God. I love that one. As slave and servant, as spiritual rock, as first fruits of those who have died, the new Adam. So that's just some of the terms that Paul is trying to help people understand Jesus with. And there's so many potential meanings there and dimensions of who Jesus is that are revealed.

Tony Chvala-Smith 20:42

And for Paul, many of these terms are connected to a cosmic vision of salvation he has. Paul's vision of salvation is not about the individual, getting out of here. Paul's vision of salvation is about a total transformed creation. And so there's that larger cosmic dimension to many of these terms.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 21:06

You could hear some of that in those terms. And then in the gospels, we're going to actually break it down to the synoptics, which would be Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and then John, because John gets really carried away with everything. But I'll give you some of the ones from the synoptics. And Tony will give you some of the ones from John. So the gospels also have Son of Man, Son of David, Lord, Christ, Messiah, Emmanuel, (as we talked about earlier, that comes from Matthew), God with us (that's what it means). Although in all of these, there's God naming Jesus in the baptism, my son, the Beloved, Son of God, Prophet, Teacher, Rabbi, Master, Son of the living God.

Carla Long 22:05

Is Anointed One in there?

Tony Chvala-Smith 22:07

Yeah, that's what Christ or Christos means, yeah.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 22:11

Holy one of God, Bringer of the Kingdom of God. So those are just some of the ones and then from John...

Tony Chvala-Smith 22:20

John is very rich with titles. So starting right off, Jesus is the Word of God, the logos, the rational principle that pervades everything in the universe. And then connected to that, he is the Creator. That is the one through whom - in John's gospel - God has created the world. In John's gospel, he's the only begotten Son. And the Greek term there, *monogenes*, is better translated 'one of a kind,' he's unique. But also early in John's gospel, there's a text which refers to Jesus as the only begotten God. Further, he's the Lamb of God, he's referred to as the King of Israel in John 1. He's the Good Shepherd. He's the Living Bread, the Vine, the Light of the World, he's Bread from Heaven. And then there's this whole

series of sayings where Jesus says, 'I am,' which is a kind of echoing back to the exodus story in the Hebrew Bible. He's the gate for the sheep. He's the resurrection and the life. He's the way, the truth, and the life. And he is, again, creator. So these titles - and this is not even the whole New Testament, right? - these titles are not doctrines, they're experiences, they're connected to experiences.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 23:44

And one of the things that I was noticing as I was writing these down, is that I think with all of them, they are all titles that have to do with relationship, descriptive of some kind of relationship that Jesus Christ has. Some of them are about the relationship between Jesus and God, or as God, others are about the relationship to creation, and still others - and this is most of them - are a relationship to us, to the first disciples and then through extension to us. And so we begin to think about Jesus as being not this one person in this one time, or this one person, or even God who did something one time, but his ongoing relationship, and that was the intent. That's what even the earliest Christians understood as Jesus' purpose, Jesus' goal in being present. So the idea that it just gives us so many more possibilities of ways of understanding and valuing, and actually incorporating Jesus into our daily devotions, our worship, is to recognize that this is that part of God that is eternally wanting to be in relationship with us.

Tony Chvala-Smith 25:23

I think Jesus reveals the profound relationality of God. And that's really important in our age and time, when God seems remote or non-credible to people. Another thing, too, is if you think about these different titles we've been going through, there's a very deep human dimension to most of them. And that is that they all speak to things that we yearn for. In John's gospel, when Jesus says, I'm the vine, you are the branches, think about what that refers to in human experience. We long to be connected with something that's living, alive, organic, something that gives us life. And these deep things we long for are easily covered over by all the shallow things we long for in our consumer culture, when we're sold products by the second, and you can no longer even go online without being sold products. I mean, the human worth is connected to what you can buy. But that's a sham, because it keeps us from seeing the deepest things we long for. And these titles the New Testament gives to Jesus can remind us of our yearnings, where our hearts and souls are truly empty. Jesus then becomes the connecting point for those.

Carla Long 27:06

That makes so much sense to me. When you talk about Jesus being fully human and fully divine, that doesn't make a ton of sense, right? Like, as a math major, you can't be 100% of something and 100% of something else. And I mean, in my logical brain, it just doesn't work. But it does work as the connection. I really appreciate that metaphor about Jesus, 'I am the vine,' and the connection between the thing that gives us nourishment and gives us life. And then where we are as the grapes. I guess we are the grapes, right?

Tony Chvala-Smith 27:44

Yeah, sure. Yeah, we're branches that are supposed to bear fruit.

Carla Long 27:49

We can be grapes!

Tony Chvala-Smith 27:50

We can be grapes. I'm okay with that.

Carla Long 27:53

Well, I mean, it's quite a résumé that Jesus has built up with all of these different names. And yes, these relationships. And I mean, all these names that have to do with relationships. Because you know, earlier, Charmaine, you were talking about how Jesus is still with us, and we can draw strength from Jesus, and sometimes I just have a hard time with that, thinking about what that looks like, and how I can actually live that out.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 28:22

Sometimes I think it has less to do with our choosing it, and more to do with our being aware of Jesus with us. And the reality for me of Jesus with us really took shape, and began to stir my imagination, at a camp I was at. It might have been my last year of junior high or first year of senior high, I think. But back then I was - even more so than I am now - I could only take people for so long, and then I needed to get away and have some alone time. And something what you and Tony were talking about as far as that longing that we have for God, for me, that could surface when I was at camp. And that reality that God was there, that God loved me, that was the one place where that was strong. And I just needed time to take that in and away from people. And so there's times I would skip meals and I would go out into the woods to one of the campfire sites, just to have some time alone. And in one of these times, I remember looking out over the lake, and that longing being so strong within me, but at the same time becoming slowly aware of a presence with me, with the sense of Christ being there with me, in an almost tangible way, touching me. And though that's something that I probably wouldn't have told a lot of people at that time - because it's like, how do you know, how can you prove that, what does that mean - that has become a very grounding thing for me in the awareness that God wants to be with us. And God, in Christ, often is, but that we are not taking the time or know how to name or sense the presence that is Christ with us. So, I think, part of it is that attuning to what does it feel like, how does it affect us, when Christ's presence, or Christ's peace, or Christ's love is there with us as God with us?

Tony Chvala-Smith 31:17

That reminds me of the important saying of the French mathematician. Do you know Pascal, Carla?

Carla Long 31:27

Oh do!!

Tony Chvala-Smith 31:31

This French Catholic mathematician and philosopher, Blaise Pascal - this is like 17th century or so, the 1600s, I think - and Pascal, as a philosopher, was also a devout Christian. And one of his sayings was 'The heart has its reasons of which reason is scarcely aware.' That is, our rationality touches many things, but there's some things our rationality is not well suited for, and that our heart, our soul, our deepest self is more suited for him. So I'm listening to Charmaine talk about that experience, I immediately think of Pascal and that there's a profound rationality in that experience that is not 'two plus two equals four' rationality. And for me, I have to say, where Jesus first became extremely real to

me was actually in one of those altar call experiences. And I will give the short version of the story, which has an embarrassing element in that in a way. When I was a freshman in college, and was going into seeking mode, I was going to a Baptist Church in the evenings on Sunday, just to their services. But I had an ulterior motive, a former girlfriend, that was her church, so...

Carla Long 32:59

Ahhh! And the truth comes out!

Tony Chvala-Smith 33:00

I was basically cruising the church for her. But one particular night the service really captured me, and they actually did an altar call at the end. And I remember very distinctly this experience of simply needing to respond to that. And when I got home that night, I'm 18 years old, I looked different to myself, something had changed in me. I didn't stay in that church, much to their chagrin, because they immediately wanted to wrap that experience in the fundamentalist ideology of inerrancy and absolutism and authoritarianism. And as an 18-year-old, who was also scientifically minded, I just couldn't buy the wrapping they wanted to put around that. But it got me started. And it wasn't long after that, that I found my way to what is now Community of Christ. But that experience has stayed with me all these years. Christ became real for me, but that realness has filled out in lots of different ways over the years through theological study, and through listening to others experiences, through reading, through devotion, through prayer, and through a bunch of years of ministry and service, so Jesus appears broader and richer to me as the years go on.

Carla Long 34:30

Actually, I've never gone through an altar call experience or anything like that, but one thing that really draws me to 'Jesus as God with us' is looking at Jesus' humanity and recognizing that things that Jesus felt, I feel sometimes, and it's okay to feel those things. Which one of us has not felt a righteous anger at something that has happened in the world, or happened to people that we love. When Jesus goes into the temple and throws a table, which one of us has not wanted to throw a table? I mean, I think it'd be fun, personally. But the very idea that Jesus went through these things as well, and just because Jesus was fully divine and fully human, doesn't mean he didn't feel these things. And so I can relate to Jesus on a really personal level in those emotions that he showed in the stories in the synoptics.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 35:34

Absolutely. And that really takes us into the whole idea of Jesus as example, both knowing that God knows what our feelings are as human beings, what our experiences are like as human beings, and identifies with us, and that we can identify then with Christ. And 'Jesus as an example' is particularly big in the synoptics, in Mark, Matthew and Luke, and Luke in particular. That's one of his main themes. As these gospel writers are writing, they're writing for a group of people that they know are trying to figure out how do we live this new way of being as Christ followers in a world where this is a new thing? How do we even do this. And so those three gospel writers are very intentional about portraying a person that we would like to be like, that we would like to exemplify in some ways. And so there's all these ways that Jesus is an example for us, whether it is in the gospel of Mark... Jesus suffers there, and it's Jesus' suffering that is the sign of who Jesus is. This was written to a group of people who were suffering, and they needed to know that Christ had walked that way before them, and that their

suffering, too, was not a sign that they had fallen away from God, but that their suffering was a sign that they were following Jesus in the right way. So not that we should seek out suffering, but it was a way to help them be reassured that they were on the right path, that Jesus too had suffered.

Tony Chvala-Smith 37:43

And then for example, in Matthew, the community that that gospel was written for was a community primarily of Christians whose heritage was Jewish. So, we would call them Jewish Christians. And one of the things that you can tell behind the scenes that's going on in that gospel is that that community is experiencing internal turmoil, and as non-Jews want a piece of this Jesus action with them. So in that gospel, Jesus includes. And so imitating Jesus in Matthew's gospel is the struggle of learning to include those who are not like us. This is a 1960s movie reference; I sometimes call it the Guess Who's Coming to Dinner gospel. That's an old Sidney Poitier movie from, I think, early 60s in which an African American and an Anglo have a loving relationship, very kind of avant garde in that time period, but you can sort of get the picture, Guess Who's Coming to Dinner.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 38:55

And that's another one of those example things. If we are to follow Jesus, then we reach out to offer hope and healing to those that Jesus reached out to. And often those were those in the lower parts of the society, or those who were considered traitors, or those who were invisible. And so there's another place where what it means to follow Jesus is to touch, and to include, and to bring hope and healing to those who society has already made judgment on, has already tossed away.

Tony Chvala-Smith 39:40

Charmaine mentioned already that the gospel of Luke really is the gospel par excellence of 'Jesus as example.' This author is a Hellenistic person who understands very clearly the importance of a model for readers, and so more than any other gospel, Luke's gospel focuses on Jesus at prayer. And so Jesus becomes a model of praying. Jesus becomes - as in Matthew - a model of inclusion, but especially in Luke's gospel a model of inclusion of women fully into the circle of disciples. In Luke's gospel, the disciples in a particular moment want God to firebomb a Samaritan village, and Jesus is like, Seriously? So Jesus becomes a model of acceptance of those who are different, or the enemy. And then Jesus' death on the cross is portrayed a bit differently in Luke's gospel, where instead of as in Mark and Matthew, My God why have you forsaken me?, in Luke's gospel Jesus' dying words are, Father forgive them for they don't know what they're doing. So Jesus becomes a model of forgiveness towards your persecutors and enemies, and in his case your murderers. So this exemplary theme in the first three gospels is really important. Also, I think it's important to say that in the ancient world, when someone chose to write a biography - and Matthew, Mark, and Luke a lot, and John to a lesser extent, fall in the genre of ancient biographies - when you chose to write in the biography genre, one of the things they implicitly knew about reading that genre was that they were going to be reading a story about why you should either imitate this person, or not imitate this person. So the very nature of the narratives told the readers, this is somebody you really want to learn how to be like and follow. And so that's why the term 'disciple,' which is used a lot for example a Matthew. Disciple means learner, to learn what Jesus does and says, and to learn to be loved.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 42:13

So then the third category was 'Jesus as bringer of peace and equality,' and there's some overlap with the things we've just been saying. But particularly in the synoptic gospels, the primary goal of Jesus, the symbol of who he is and what he is putting into play in the world, is the idea of the kingdom of God. Jesus as the one who brings what God hopes for all creation. He brings that beginning step, those glimpses of hope to the world. And this is somewhat evident in his teaching, but definitely in his healing, in his challenging of people - especially people of power - to see things in a different way, to not let possession or status be what matters, but to let who they are in God be what matters. So the whole idea of Jesus as the sign of the kingdom of God, he inherently then is bringing - to individuals, yes, but the idea is to creation - he brings peace. And then, to communities he is the symbol, the example, but also the bringer of equality, which was a real struggle as we can tell in Paul's letters to the first churches, that equality was not going to be an easy one to overcome in a very stratified, gender sensitive culture, that had very concrete places where people fit. And if you didn't fit, you were causing trouble within families, within society. So Jesus was a disturber, but at the same time, because he's disturbing things, he's also bringing a different kind of peace.

Tony Chvala-Smith 44:29

The term 'Kingdom of God,' I think it's really important to not misunderstand it. So often, the default setting for kingdom of God, kingdom of heaven - kingdom of heaven, by the way, is Matthew's way of saying the same thing - the default setting is to see these as the afterlife, and it's so far from what's meant in most places it's used in the gospels, (and we can tell) that people are talking about something from a totally different set of books. So the term *kingdom* in English is not a very good way to render the Greek term *basilea*, which is more active. It means reign, the reign of God, God's activity of reigning. So when Jesus says, The kingdom of God is at hand, what he's saying really is God's reign has begun, watch me, it's happening right here in front of you. And so in what Jesus does, and says, and how he lives, and how he acts, that's what God's reign looks like. God's way of reigning is to embrace the leper and the poor, and those who are suffering and sick and dying. God's way of reigning is to make space for children. God's way of reigning is to challenge or correct the powerful and the wealthy, which Jesus does. God's way of reigning is to make space for the outsider and the enemy. And by turning Jesus' statements about the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven into the afterlife, what Christianity has successfully done then is evaded all responsibility for being the presence of God's kingdom here and now. And so instead of continuing Jesus' revolution, which is God's intended revolution, a nonviolent, peaceful revolution, but instead of doing that, Christians instinctively through the centuries have supported the status quo, have support injustice as usual. At the same time, they were trying to worship analogies of this, and you know, we're human, we mess up, the church messes up. And Christ still abides with us, like he did with his disciples who messed up all the time. Really, if we want to capture this sense of Jesus as bringer of peace and equality, going back to the kingdom of God sayings, and the (Jesus of that activity), gives us a real clue for what that means. By our front door, we have a plaque. It's a small plaque, that has a statement from the rule of Saint Benedict, and this is very important in Benedictine monasticism. The plaque says, "All guests, who present themselves, are to be received as Christ." Benedictine monasticism tried to take that kingdom of God ethic really seriously, and how they treated visitors, and strangers, and the kind of hospitality they offered. Imagine what it would be like if Christian churches took that seriously. All guests who presented themselves, whether to the church, whether at the border, whether in our communities or in our homes, are to be received as

Christ. What kind of world would the church then stand for, if that were the case? A different kind of world than the one that's currently being made.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 48:20

And a different meaning to the term *salvation*. That salvation there is for all, for the whole of creation, and not just for me, getting mine in the afterlife. And I thought of one experience where this idea of Jesus as bringer of peace has impacted me. I have lots of siblings, and as often happens when you have siblings, there are long term relationships that can cause anxiety, and anger, and frustration, and hurt. This was a number of years ago. I was very upset with my discussion with a couple of my siblings, and I went off to a place where I could yell at God, and I was praying, God, why is that so hard? Why do they always pick on me? Why do they hurt me? And I was thinking, they should be kind to me, they should be the people I can share my deepest feelings with. And it's just that I needed to die some of my expectations of others. The part of what was causing me so much pain and anxiety was that I was letting these "shoulds" about my sibling - should be my confidants, and should be my save people - I was measuring my siblings against what I thought they should be. And I just really strongly sensed this idea that Christ calls us to die to our status or images that we may want to have of ourselves. I needed to die to some of my expectations of what others should be to me. And it just brought such a peace to me, to realize that I was using my expectations, my unreasonable expectation, in such a way that it created judgment of them, created these feelings of injustice towards myself. And it was just a real gift to be able to see that, and not have to let those expectations of what I thought they should be determined who they were, what their worth was. And what they owed me, and what my worth was then.

Tony Chvala-Smith 51:24

I had a similar kind of experience a number of years ago. There was this particular fall, when one of my disciplines was to go for a walk in the morning and work through the phrases of the Lord's Prayer. This is the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. And I will tell you now, this was two days after September 11. And, of course, everybody was in shock. And I went for this walk, and I'm praying the Lord's Prayer. And all of a sudden, I get to, Forgive us [our trespasses as we forgive] those who trespass against us. And I had to just stop. It completely arrested me. And I wanted to say, No, no! I'm not going to do that! I found myself unable to go there with the prayer. But notice that the prayer, Jesus' prayer, flushed out of me my own hatred and enmity. Forgive us our trespasses [and forgive] those who trespass against us. It was a really powerful moment, in which I saw more clearly the kind of social, political, and deeply spiritual implications of that prayer. Jesus continues to call us through his words, his actions, through the stories in the gospel, and through the Christian communities that are really committed to living up to his message.

Carla Long 53:02

Sometimes it's really embarrassing to talk about Jesus, because you don't want to be labeled as "the Jesus Freak" in the room, or the one who calls upon Jesus all the time. And everything that you've said today - it is not an embarrassing way to talk about Jesus, is it? It's straight from the gospels, all of the names that you had for Jesus, the Lord's Prayer, and talking about unrealistic expectations - these are not embarrassing ways to talk about Jesus. These are genuine, intentional and real ways to talk about

Christ. And so why don't we talk about Christ more like this, rather than the other way? What stops us from doing it in this way?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 53:48

I think probably the only thing that stops us is our self-consciousness, and are unsureness as to whether or not it will be heard and accepted. But as you've said, I think we need not worry about that. I think the realness and the sincerity of our experience is enough. And if we can keep reminding ourselves that as followers of Christ, that means we're following someone, and that someone is with us, before us, beside us. And that to talk about Jesus in that way makes it very relevant to our daily lives, rather than talking about a Jesus who is only about giving us this passport to have, this ticket. So I think to recognize that talking about Jesus as if it's normal for him to be with us, or us to be with him, maybe the easiest way to start being able to share those is to recognize them in our lives.

Tony Chvala-Smith 55:17

Yeah, and I think it's really important. I guess I'll say it this way, not to give [...] the Jesus field with types of religion and Christian piety that often seem to miss the mark, that have reduced it to a formula that you have to say, and to an experience you have to have, which seems so far from the multi-valiant, multi-meaning, rich experience both of the New Testament and of the Christian tradition. We don't want to stop talking about Jesus, because that then lets the other setting truly be the default setting. We really need to claim that, and say, Look, there are so many other ways to be faithful to Jesus and what he stands for. Another experience along those lines is as I think back to when I was preparing for my doctoral exams, which would advance me to candidacy and the degree. And one of my exams was going to be in Christology. One of the texts I was reading in preparation for that exam was a book by the famous German theologian Juergen Moltmann. The book was titled *The Crucified God*. Moltmann had been a German soldier in World War II. He later wrote an autobiography in which he talks about how Christ became real, and saving, and healing for him in his experiences as a prisoner of war, when he realized - as a German soldier - what he actually had been fighting for, the kind of the horror of the of the camps and so on. But in *Crucified God*, he's trying to process the death of Jesus as God, the Son, and what that means about human suffering. It was a profound moment in what was otherwise an intellectual experience - but a profound moment - in reading this theologian, wrestling with the idea of God, the Father, giving up and losing God, the Son. Like a rift, a rent, in the very being of God, in which for Moltmann, having lived through the horror of World War II, he found in that the space for redemption, that the worst violent things human beings can do are known, and that human beings who do them can still find redemption, and a place in God's heart through that experience of God's own loss and separation. Very, very powerful moment for me in my studies, and I have always remembered that, and it's a place, it's a reason, that Jesus still gives me hope, hope in a God who is present with us in suffering, and who can help us make meaning out of it, and make a different kind of future out of it. So I do not want to concede the Jesus story to too narrow theological interests, or those who want to nationalize it into an American myth of some kind. That would be a tragedy.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 59:05

So one of the things I would encourage people to do is to - if you're interested in seriously pursuing a relationship with Jesus or Christ, or however you wanting to understand him - is to take a look through some of those names, and see if there's one that really strikes your heart, your soul, as an aspect of

Jesus you would like to go deeper into. And take that image or that name or that title, and let it be your avenue of prayer. Let it be how you start a prayer, or start a journal entry, or simply take time in imagination of what does that mean about who Jesus wants to be in my life, with me, with me in my struggles or with me in my longings. So take a look at the richness of the aspects of Christ, and spend some time with just that one. And note what it opens in you, and what it alerts you to, as far as what God is doing and wanting to do in your life. So that would be a way of letting this not be just our experiences, our head stuff, information, but to make room for a kind of natural, organic way for you to do this in your own life, to give Jesus room in the realities of who you are in your daily life.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:00:56

I think, too, of a discipline. I guess I'll call it "practicing the presence of Jesus." And it would be kind of like a Lectio Divina, which is to take a gospel story, one that attracts you, or captures your attention, and focus on who Jesus is depicted as in that story. And where does it connect to your life right now. These stories can be read, but they can also be practiced. And that's a different way of reading them. It's to enter into the story in a different sort of way, and see where you are in that particular story. It can be surprising, actually.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:01:46

Well, thank you, Carla, for giving us this opportunity to explore some of the dimensions of who Jesus is, what it means to see Jesus as God with us. To see Jesus as one who's trying to be an example, give us some ways of living our lives more honestly and authentically, and Jesus as one who brings something we can't sometimes bring ourselves: to bring peace. And helps us see our need for equality, and an openness to each other. So thank you.

Carla Long 1:02:29

No, thank you. I hope that the listeners have thought through this and had maybe some questions for us. So we're definitely open to some questions, listeners. And Tony, I cut you off. What were you going to say?

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:02:40

I was just going to say the same thing. I was going to say we're definitely open to doing a round two. I guess that's kind of a violent image.

Carla Long 1:02:49

Naw, we'll take it.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:02:51

We're happy to do another session on Jesus, depending on questions and comments people would like pursue.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:02:57

So much to be said and explored!

Carla Long 1:03:00

Well, thank you so much for talking with us. And thank you for talking about such a huge topic.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:03:06

Thank you for being willing to follow us and guide us along the way.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:03:13

Yes, thank you, Carla. And we really enjoyed being able to do these with you.

Josh Mangelson 1:03:23

The views expressed in this episode are of those speaking, and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Latter-day Seekers team, or of Community of Christ. The music has been provided by Ben Howington. You can find his music at Mormonguitar.com.