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SPEAKERS

Josh Mangelson, Kevin Harper, Brittany Mangelson

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.

Brittany Mangelson 00:34

Hello, Project Zion listeners. This is Brittany Mangelson. Today we are going to be continuing our Holy Grounds Series where we talk about spiritual practices. And I'm really excited about the conversation today. We have on my friend Kevin Harper, who lives in Arizona. He is going to be walking us through one of his favorite spiritual practices. Kevin, I am really excited to have you on the podcast. So, thanks for saying yes.

Kevin Harper 01:06

Well, you're welcome. Thank you for having me. I feel honored to be asked.

Brittany Mangelson 01:13

So, Kevin, why don't you introduce yourself to our listeners. Let's help them get to know you a little bit better.

Kevin Harper 01:20

Sure. Well, I live in Anthem, Arizona, which is about 20 minutes north of the Phoenix metropolitan area. I was actually born in Woodbine, Iowa, which is near the Council Bluffs, Iowa area. I've always been Community of Christ, several branches of my family tree, go back to the 1830s, even in upstate New York, so my history goes back pretty much to the beginning. After the death of the Smith brothers, my family pretty much stayed in western Iowa and joined the Reorganization in the 1860s. One of my great, great, great grandfathers was the first pastor at Galland's Grove, in Shelby County, Iowa, which is about 20 miles from where I was born. So again, my family is really rooted in that part of the country. I'm a co-pastor at Thunderbird West congregation in Glendale, Arizona. I serve on the Board of

Directors for Whispering Pines campground and I'm lucky enough to serve on the Board of Directors for the Community of Christ Historic Sites Foundation. My wife Robin and I are raising two children, Sedona who will be 12 in July and Harrison who is eight. Harrison has chosen to be baptized this summer at reunion at Whispering Pines. This is where his sister was baptized, just a couple of years ago on her 10th birthday. So, Whispering Pines is a pretty special place. When I was 13, we moved from Iowa to Whispering Pines. I grew up on the church campground, then went back to Graceland for my college years, and ended up back in Arizona, to start my career and meet Robin and raise a family.

Brittany Mangelson 03:47

Nice. And I love that now, Whispering Pines is still such a part of your continued story and you're bringing your kids into the church through that campground. I think that's really special. So, we're talking about spiritual practices. And I'm curious, what spiritual practice do you use to best connect with the divine? And how do you incorporate that into your life?

Kevin Harper 04:14

Well, without a doubt, it's nature gazing and praising. That's what it's called in the Community of Christ website, the list of spiritual practices. I didn't even know it was called that. It's something that I've been doing my whole life, practically, and just recently has been given a name for me. I've always known that being in nature gives me the sense of being in the presence of God, I like to think for the same reasons that Jesus was in nature so often. Being in the sacredness of creation provides opportunities to listen in the silence, to meditate, and observe your surroundings and that everything around you is God's and was created by God.

Brittany Mangelson 05:16

I actually didn't realize that it was named nature gazing and praising on the church website either. And I haven't, I don't actually think that I've gone over there to look at all the spiritual practices listed. So now I'm curious about it, and we'll be sure to put that in the show notes of this episode. Being in nature, what does that look like for you, in your daily life? What does it look like?

Kevin Harper 05:48

Well, you know, sometimes I like to be in nature with large groups, like, at camps or at reunions, sometimes small groups with friends, and sometimes just with my family, and that's primarily where I spend most of my time in nature, with my family. But sometimes I love to be completely alone and the common denominator through all of that is God is always there. The beauty of it is that can do it daily, whether it's a walk around your neighborhood or through a park, even if you have impaired mobility you can sit in front of a window and watch the birds, watch the wildlife, depending on where you're at. Set up a bird feeder or hummingbird feeder and just watch. It's really, really fun to do that. A lot of people probably engage in this spiritual practice without even knowing that it is a spiritual practice. Any time that you can get outside, you know, hiking or backpacking and camping, skiing, I know you guys ski up where you live, you know, kayaking, mountain biking, anything to get you outside is a spiritual practice, or can be a spiritual practice. Being outdoors always gives me the sense of being in the sacredness of creation.

Brittany Mangelson 07:54

Yeah, I feel like in today's world, where we thrive in being busy, we pride ourselves in being busy, and there's so many distractions and ways that our attention can be pulled. When you're in nature, I feel like you are more intentional with your time if you're not plugged in to the news, or what's on Facebook, or what's on Twitter, or all the things that we could be doing to clean our house or whatever it may be. There are distractions in nature, don't get me wrong, but you're intentional about it. What you're going to discover is those disrupt distractions, those hikes or like you said, a hummingbird or the sound of running water or whatever it may be, I feel like that's a really intentional way to use your time to break between the everyday hustle and bustle of life. So that's really, really beautiful.

Kevin Harper 09:01

Yeah, you know, and nature is a very accepting and inclusive place. It's never gonna reject you. It's never gonna judge you. It's a place for me that can let my mind clear, settle my emotions, [reflect on] what's going on in my daily life and let everything fall away, if that's what needs to happen. It's very healing for me to be to be out in nature.

Brittany Mangelson 09:36

Yeah, I agree with that. Whenever we get a chance to head down to Moab, Southern Utah, we don't have to travel to be in nature, generally, but that's a place where anytime I go back there, I am reminded this is life. This is the rhythm that I want to have. This is the steadiness. This is the pace that I want to go at. It brings me in and regroups me a little bit.

Kevin Harper 10:07

Right. Everybody's gonna have their favorite places in nature. I love the Moab area in southern Utah, but I also love the Midwest and the trees and the grass and the green. You know, there's that misconception where you have to have the Rocky Mountains to have that inspiring moment, that mountaintop experience and it's not that way. You can walk around a pond or a lake or take a walk through the prairie grasses and wildflowers of the Midwest. It's really anywhere that you are.

Brittany Mangelson 10:56

I remember when we went to New York, in high school. I went with my dance team. We spent about a week there. We were just a bunch of punk teenagers from Utah, but the change of scenery was a new kind of nature. I was from this relatively small town in Utah and going to the big city, the Big Apple. It was this concrete jungle that was so mesmerizing, but in and of itself, that's a form of creation. I just want to point out that it doesn't necessarily have to be some outdoors thing on a mountain or at a river or a pond. Even in the hustle and bustle of everyday life, if you are in a big city, just walking around the neighborhood can be a spiritual practice with creation. I really appreciate that. There's so much diversity. With the spiritual practice, like you said, you don't have to have the Rocky Mountains, you don't have to have some big national park to go to or whatever it may be. It can really be found anywhere. What about different times of the day or different seasons? Do you find diversity in that aspect of a spiritual practice?

Kevin Harper 12:16

Absolutely. You can hike any time. Some of my favorite hikes have been in storms, where you see the movement of clouds. I remember one time being in the mountains of Southern Arizona, and a

snowstorm rolled through, and the clouds were just rolling in so fast. I was at the peak of this little rise in the mountain. I could see the clouds coming in and whipping up over me and then you're in fog, you're in the clouds. I remember that being such a spectacular event. One time I was in the Grand Canyon. The only thing I can compare this to is if you're in an airplane. When you're walking in a storm and lightning, you can see lightning strike below you. You know you're on the ground. It's indescribable. Those have been some of my favorite hikes. And, you know, as long as you're prepared for that kind of environment, it is an amazing experience. Even a moonlit hike, seeing the stars stargazing, I know is a huge hobby for people. They may have different reasons as to why that is important to them. But again, that's just another great excuse to get out to nature to look at the stars. You can do it any time of day, in any weather. You've heard the saying "There's no bad weather, just bad clothing." I can relate to that. I've been stuck in some situations where I wished I had a few more layers. You just have to be prepared.

Brittany Mangelson 14:44

What would be some tips that you would give to someone who is interested in getting involved in the sacredness of creation and turning it into a spiritual practice?

Kevin Harper 14:58

That depends on what you'd like to do. But like I just said, the preparation is really important, e.g., having the right gear, having the right clothing, knowing what kind of weather might be coming, in the topography of where you might be hiking or riding your bike. That's all important. Making sure that you know your physical limitations. All of this plays into it, if you're not well prepared, or the company that you've chosen to be with you haven't prepared well enough. If they're ill prepared, and they have a miserable time, chances are highly unlikely you're going to get to go and do it again. So always study ahead, make sure you know all those things I mentioned and make that a pleasant experience. If you're taking little kids, stop often and kick some rocks, throw some rocks, not down the trail on somebody below. Make it fun for them, have snacks. You want it to be pleasant for everybody so that they want to return and do it again.

Brittany Mangelson 16:43

So, thanks for including the kids. That's what my next question was going to be is, as a dad of two relatively young kids, how have you been able to integrate this spiritual practice into your family? Do you feel like your kids are taking on that enthusiasm for nature?

Kevin Harper 17:08

Oh, yeah, they love getting out and hiking. We haven't done a lot of miles, just two or three miles. I think a five-mile hike was the max that we've done so far. But they enjoy it. One of our really good experiences for us was when we did a backpacking trip. We've done a few of them. Just a short three-mile backpacking trip. If we're next to a river or in a canyon, they just make their own fun and throw rocks into the river and sticks and watch the stick roll down the stream. It's a lot of fun for all of us.

Brittany Mangelson 18:04

That's really great. I know that being a mom of three young kids, I'm always trying to figure out how I can implement spiritual practices into our life. But sometimes I wonder about the things that I'm doing.

Can they become spiritual practices? We spend a lot of time outside. We've gone on hikes; we've gone down to the arches and things like that. But to be intentional about presenting it as a spiritual practice, I think is important and something that I haven't really done before. We hop in the car, drive up the canyon, go on a hike, go to the park, go do whatever. It's not something that we do with that amount of intentionality. So, I really appreciate hearing everything that you're saying because you've listed a lot of things that might feel mundane to people, but when approached with the right attitude and the right intention, I think that they can become a spiritual practice. So, that's something that I need to do, not try to make my family fit into the box of what I assume is a spiritual practice and have my own expectations on it, but create the moment that what we're doing can be a spiritual practice.

Kevin Harper 19:20

They'll discover it on their own. You just lead them to the place, and they will develop their theology along the way when you bring in your five senses, smelling the recent rain in the desert or smelling a newly open flower, tasting natural foods, watching the wildlife, listen to the wind blowing through the trees. Use all those five senses and teach your kids about them. Even looking at the details of a leaf, to me is an act of worship. If we can teach that to our kids, let them explore and be little adventurers, they love it. And like I said, they're gonna develop their own take on what's important to them about being in creation.

Brittany Mangelson 20:46

So, Kevin, how would you say that this spiritual practice of being in nature and being intentional with creation, how has it changed you? How has it changed you on a daily basis or on a macro level in your life?

Kevin Harper 21:08

Well, I think it's very grounding. Pun intended. Just to listen to the rocks under your feet, as you're hiking. I've heard people call hiking prayer in motion. During Arizona reunion last year, I led a meditation hike every single morning where we didn't say a thing, we just walked quietly through the forest. Like I said earlier, it's really healing to me to be able to hear the wind blowing through the trees and listening to the bird's chirp. There are lots of qualities for getting outside and exercising. Like any cardiovascular exercise, it is going to increase your cardiovascular health. It reduces stress, boosts immunity, and helps lift depression. I joke about loving to go to waterfalls, and how this was our little dose of Prozac when we hear the sound of the water going over the canyon or into a pool or feeling the spray from the waterfall. It's energizing and lifts your mood.

Brittany Mangelson 22:54

I really appreciate that you, again, have brought multiple senses into this experience, which, again, ties back to intentionality. So, the benefits really are endless.

Kevin Harper 23:08

Yeah, physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually.

Brittany Mangelson 23:13

Yeah, yeah. All of them are encompassed in being in nature and being with creation. And I think that there is a calming presence, an energizing presence, a groundedness in it, a rootedness that is all encompassing, and very holistic in the way that you approach the world. What about challenges? What do you find challenging about being in nature?

Kevin Harper 23:46

Well, you can bite off a little more than you can chew. As far as choosing a hike, you know it's only a five-mile hike, and we can do that, but then you realize it's a really steep five miles, all uphill and physically challenging. And once you are exhausted physically, then mentally, you get exhausted and spiritually, but you have to push through and get to safety. That's the most important thing and maybe also get a little nourishment on the trail. But, you know, also the time to do it is challenging. You know, we mentioned sitting in your favorite chair, watching out your picture window. We can do that. Finding the time to go kayaking, or the time to take a nice hike, to go camping, or car camping, the challenge is finding the time to do it. Everybody's competing for your time. You have to take time out of your busy schedule to intentionally do it.

Brittany Mangelson 25:18

So, Kevin, let's rewind the clock a little bit. How were you first introduced to being in nature? It sounds like you're a big nature enthusiast. I have an idea of what your answer is going to be, but where did that enthusiasm come from? When do you first remember thinking, this is how I connect with the divine?

Kevin Harper 25:43

I'm positive that it happened in Iowa. I grew up on a farm. On a farm, you're just surrounded by nature. We had a pond about a quarter mile away from our house. At a very early age, I walked back there by myself and fished and skipped stones. That's really where it started. I've always gone to Community of Christ reunions. I grew up going to Guthrie Grove in Iowa, and I don't remember ever missing a reunion. While I was growing up, my parents thought that was important to get their kids to reunion. I am so thankful that that they did. I know reunions are not the cheapest thing in the world to do. It can be kind of expensive to take your family there, but I remember my parents saying they can't afford not going to reunion. I've adopted that with my own family. I want my kids there. I want them to establish their love for nature and reunion and the people that are there that are going to love them unconditionally. I can't say enough about family camp and reunion. Now Sedona is old enough to go. She's been to junior camp, now she's moving on to junior high camp and I'm really thankful that she's excited about it and loves to go. That's been a really big part of my life. I don't think we can afford not going to reunion, not taking them there.

Brittany Mangelson 28:19

Yeah, I completely agree. I was converted through the camping experience. It makes me really excited that my kids are growing up with that. My girls have several years of Kids Camp under their belts and my little boy is about to go. It's really exciting for me to see them come together with a larger body than just our congregation, and get to encounter community and God in these sacred spaces that we create. It's exciting. So, Kevin, you did list the church website, and the section of the church website that goes over spiritual practices. Again, we'll be sure to link that in the show notes, but what other resources would you suggest people go to, to learn more?

Kevin Harper 29:21

Well, since hiking is my favorite activity, it's gonna depend on what your favorite outdoor activity is, whether it's bird watching from your living room, or mountain climbing, or the more adventurous stuff. But since hiking is my activity, I recommend getting a hiking book and going to your local bookstore, going to Amazon and getting a hiking book, and checking out your area. If there's a place in nature that you've always wanted to go, Yosemite or the redwoods, just go. If you want more reading material, inspirational type of material, you can go to the nature section in the bookstore. There are all kinds of inspirational stories out there that can be just amazing teachers about nature and what you can find there. One of my go-to books, a book that I've had a very long time, is called *Hiking: The Ultimate Natural Prescription for Health and Wellness* by Philip Ferrante. It's a great resource on the physical, mental, and spiritual benefits of hiking. Get to your campground. We have 40 plus campgrounds in North America alone and so there's got to be a campground relatively close to you. Go to a reunion, send your kids to camp, send your grandkids, send your nieces and nephews. Be a counselor. Be on staff. Indulge in Community of Christ's camping program. It's really phenomenal. We have amazing campgrounds in beautiful parts of the world. That's what I would recommend, the resources that we have within the church, our campgrounds.

Brittany Mangelson 32:09

And like you said, you probably don't have to look or go very far to find one. So, Kevin, I want to thank you for everything that you've shared. This has made me reflect on my own relationship with nature and the divine and how I encounter God in the outside. But I want to give you an opportunity to leave us with any other stories that you might have involving this practice.

Kevin Harper 32:44

I remember years ago, I was with a group of Graceland friends, and we were hiking a few miles of the Appalachian Trail. We were in North Carolina, real close to the Tennessee border. We stopped at a place along this beautiful river. I think the river was called Nantahala. I don't know if that's the correct pronunciation, but along this river there was the Nantahala Outdoor Center, a retail shop and a nice place to eat lunch along the river. I remember there was an advertisement, a poster board, advertising the Appalachian Trail Conference. It must be an annual event. There was a statement on that, or a quote on that advertisement. I'm in my early 20s and for whatever reason, it made an impression on me, and I wrote it down. I actually have that same piece of paper that I use as a bookmark in the book that I referenced earlier in our conversation. I'll read you that quote. "It's remote for detachment, narrow for chosen company, winding for leisure, lonely for contemplation. The trail leads not merely north, south, east and west, but upwards to the body, mind and soul." That made an impact on me. I wrote it down and I read it every once in a while, and it still means a lot to me. So, thank you for letting me share that.

Brittany Mangelson 35:01

Yeah, thank you. That's really beautiful and it got at the heart of my awkward commentary in our conversation of what I was trying to say. So, we should leave it to the professionals and to you to do the hiking.

Kevin Harper 35:19

Well, I would like to say too, I noticed that Matt Parker in Calgary, Canada, was leading a hike. And that's another thing too, get a group of people together and go for a hike. It made me laugh when I saw Parker's event. I think he created an event on Facebook, and he called it "Restoration Ramble." I thought, well, what a great name. I led a hike a couple of years ago and I called it "Hike and Seek." So anyway, kind of a fun play on words and to get a group of friends together and get out there and do it.

Brittany Mangelson 36:14

Yeah, I think the need and the desire and the want, and the interest is definitely there, because we all get boxed up in our little corners of the world, our cubicles, our desks, whatever it may be. But to bust out of that every once in a while, and just sit and be in nature, and really take in all of God's creation, it's an enduring principle of ours, the sacredness of creation. This is something that we believe in in Community of Christ, which is really exciting. So, thank you, Kevin. I've loved this conversation. It's been really good, and again, has made me reflect on my own relationship with God and the great outdoors.

Kevin Harper 37:01

You bet. Well, thanks for asking me and I'm glad to be a part of the Project Zion community. I'm a big fan and you guys are doing just great, great things.

Brittany Mangelson 37:13

Well, thanks for lending your voice to the myriad of episodes we've done so far.

Josh Mangelson 37:19

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