

Holy Grounds | Spiritual Practices

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SPEAKERS

Carla Long, Josh Mangelson, Katie Harmon-McLaughlin

Josh Mangelson 00:22

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Carla Long 00:55

Hello, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla Long, and today's episode is the introduction to a new series called Holy Grounds. It's a series that is all about spiritual practices and spiritual formation. In this series, I'll be interviewing people from all over the church in many different countries around the world about their favorite type of spiritual practice, why is, it is important to them, and why they do it. But before we jump into the different types of spiritual practices, we should probably talk to someone who can tell us more about them. And that's why I'm excited to introduce you to Katie Harmon-McLaughlin who works as a spiritual formation specialist with Community of Christ. Katie, thanks for being our first guest, uh, in this new series, Holy Grounds. It's great to have you here.

Katie Harmon-McLaughlin 01:48

Thank you for having me.

Carla Long 01:49

Now, um, I think one of the first questions I have for you, and hopefully our listeners, um, are wanting to know as well, but what does a spiritual formation specialist actually do?

Katie Harmon-McLaughlin 02:02

Well, that's a great question. And I think I have an amazing job because, uh, my responsibility is to provide experiences, resources and training for spiritual formation for individuals, for congregations and for our worldwide community. Um, and so sometimes that looks like, uh, experiences, uh, such as World Conference where we gather and, um, engage in discernment on important topics. That also looks like, uh, Daily Bread, which is a communal spiritual practice that Community of Christ has been engaging in for many years. Uh, it looks like spiritual retreats in Independence, Missouri, and Kirtland, Ohio, where Community of Christ has two temples. And my favorite part is simply walking with others on their spiritual journey as they are, uh, seeking to grow in deeper relationship with God.

Carla Long 02:58

Well, that actually does sound really fun. Uh how do you, what do you mean when you say you walk with others in their spiritual journey? Do you, like, counsel people or how does that, what does that look like?

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 03:11

Well, I think in Community of Christ, the phrase that, um, is becoming more familiar is spiritual companionship. And it's simply, whether it's a person, um, or a congregation, being willing to, uh, be present to what God is up to in their lives and, uh, be a safe space to listen to people's deepest questions; uh, to be that person who is willing to offer prayer or make space for prayer to be heard. Uh, and, so, in whatever condition, uh, is happening in life, just simply being attentive to how the Spirit is moving and shaping us in the midst of that.

Carla Long 03:54

Well, that sounds like a, it's a really, um, it carries a lot of responsibility on your parts. Would you find that to be true?

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 04:04

Yeah, I would say it's a tremendous responsibility and a tremendous privilege. Um, I was, I had the opportunity to be trained in spiritual direction which is the ecumenical term for that type of spiritual companion relationship. And, so, it's also, um, a practice that stands in this long tradition throughout time of people recognizing that, um, the spiritual journey is something that we have to do for ourselves, but not alone.

Carla Long 04:42

So, I've actually had a spiritual director for, um, the past 11 years that I've worked for Community of Christ, and I have just found that to be so, so valuable in my ministry. I have likened it to, for me at least, uh, you know, when you get on an airplane and they say you have to adjust your own oxygen mask before you can adjust somebody else's oxygen mask and it sounds really selfish, right? Like, Oh, I should take care of myself before I care about other people. But really, in, in this, uh, in, in this example, if, if you're not okay with yourself, it's really hard to help someone else be okay with themselves. Does that make sense? Is that a good example?

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 05:22

Oh, absolutely. And especially in, um, church leadership. It's really hard to lead others to places we're not willing to go ourselves. And, so, um, having that space where you can walk with another person who is helping keep you accountable to your deepest yearnings to be in connection with God is so important because I can find tons of ways to resist and evade those yearnings because they might change me. Um, and, so, having that person to walk with me has been so critical for my own spiritual development that is ongoing.

Carla Long 05:59

Yeah. And it also kind of helps keep you honest about it, you know? You're right, you can think of a zillion reasons why you shouldn't be doing them. And then, and then once you do a spiritual practice, you're like, Why don't I do this every day? This makes me feel so much better. But having someone

walk with you and talk with you about it reminds you that, Hey, this is a pretty important part of my life and a part of, important part of my day.

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 06:21

Absolutely. That, that sense of companionship, whether it's an actual spiritual director, an evangelist in Community of Christ, uh, a pastor, a friend, a family member, whoever it is, I think those people in our life are so important for us as we continue to be transformed in the Spirit.

Carla Long 06:40

Absolutely. Well, thanks for explaining that more. I, I actually have some more questions about, these are just general questions about, like, what are spiritual practices?

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 06:51

So I would say that spiritual practices are ways of waking us up to God's presence, both within and in the world around us. Um, and we use the word practice, or sometimes you might have heard the phrase spiritual discipline, because it implies a long term relationship that may exercise areas of our hearts we might otherwise resist using. So, I see it as twofold. Uh, the first is the waking up to God's presence within us and in the world around us. And the second is that practice or discipline, part of committing to something over a period of time that begins to shape and form and transform us in the image and the likeness of God. Um, and I'll also say, I think, you know, I know this podcast series is going to focus on lots of particular spiritual practices which is amazing to be able to explore those. Um, and yet, sometimes we get so caught up on, uh, the, How do I do this, of a spiritual practice, when I think what's so essential is what is happening in us as we engage, how we're being formed over time as we take that intentional time to grow deeper in relationship with the divine.

Carla Long 08:10

Well, we're so human, right? Uh, all of us, we always want like a to do list and a, and a checklist. And it feels so good to know what's going to happen and to be in control of everything. But it sounds like what you're saying that when you start doing a spiritual practice, one of the most important elements is to not be in control and to, and to let that go.

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 08:32

Yeah, I think that's a really big part of it. Um, to just be willing to be present with God in the way that um, makes most sense for you. And, so, you know, I don't know if you want me to talk about the different types of spiritual practices, um, but just as there are, um, different types of people, there are that many different ways of connecting with God which is beautiful because that represents our diversity which is an image of, um, the diversity of our God. Uh, and, so, when we're engaging in practice, there's, there's ways that we can get kind of caught up on, uh, the form and the structure, but, which is important, you know, some of these forms and structures have been created for purposes to help us really engage deeply and intentionally, um, but, but there's also an invitation to, like you said, to release into God's presence without feeling that need to control the outcome, which can be really hard.

Carla Long 09:33

Yeah, and really scary actually.

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 09:38

Absolutely.

Carla Long 09:39

So, you said that a, a spiritual practice or a spiritual discipline has those, those two elements are really important. When you say it's, um, the very first part is to, to wake us up, what are we waking up to? And what does that feel like or look like or do we even know? Or is it different for every person?

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 09:57

Yeah, I, I would say that it is different for every person, but, um, I was at a retreat a couple of weekends ago and someone made the comment that they sometimes feel like they're sleepwalking through life. Um, it's so easy to get caught up in our routines and our agendas and the norms that surround us on a daily basis that we lose sight of that divine presence that infuses all things. Um, and, so, when we begin to wake up to that divine presence, it could be anything and anywhere. Um, it doesn't have to be this significant set aside moment, although it can be, but it could be going on a hike or washing the dishes or having a conversation with a friend. And suddenly realizing, um, that that is a holy moment that God is a part of that moment, not because God chose to come down and be part of it, but because it already was sacred. That's the waking up. Um, and I think when we allow ourselves to do that, we recognize the absolute sacredness of life and it helps us to live in the world in a different way.

Carla Long 11:13

I actually remember, uh, when I was in seminary, one of our assignments was to go to a, a different world religion and, and sit in on their, their service and just, just to see what it's like. And I went to the, a Buddhist meditation one time and I, it was, I was just lucky enough, we actually meditated for about 30 minutes, and I was just lucky enough to, um, sit in on a class that was taught by their leader. His name was Lama Chuck. And, uh, he said the exact same thing that you said. He said that every moment can be sacred if we're fully engaged and fully intentional in that moment. That washing the dishes, like you said, can be sacred if you feel the smoothness of the dish and the warmth of the water and you are fully present in the moment, that's when God, you sense God's presence most. Is that something like what spiritual practices do, they just focus you into that moment so that you're intentionally there?

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 12:10

I think that's a huge part of it. Um, you know, spiritual practices, sometimes we see the result immediately, um, like with holy attention which is simply about sharpening our attention to the divine presence in the exact moment that we're in, in whatever place we are. Um, and in those moments, we have this waking up kind of experience where, uh, maybe suddenly we realize that we weren't fully present before, for whatever reason, and it's almost, I don't know if you've had this feeling, but it's almost like, um, you kind of step out of your own agendas for a second and you see things in this kind of more, uh, connected and broad way. Um, but I also think that spiritual practices, sometimes we don't see the immediate result. And, so, we kind of hold both of those things at once, that there's this shaping of us that occurs over time that is unseen sometimes in the moment, um, but there's also this potential to be awakened to the divine presence in the moment.

Carla Long 13:21

Well, I think that I understand that more now. I hope our listeners do. So, that's what it means to wake up. You also said the second part or, or part of the, um, spiritual practices is when you commit to something. Um, you commit to something bigger than yourself, is that what you mean? Or can you explain that a little bit more?

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 13:44

Sure. I think that the practice and the discipline part, um, is about engaging in prayer or spiritual practice even when it doesn't feel good, um, even when I don't feel like I'm waking up, even when everything within me is resisting, um, being in the presence of God, for whatever reason, that willingness to still come to practice, to still open up to silence, to still be present in prayer is what, um, exercises those kind of spiritual muscles, if you want to think of it that way, within us, that over time begin to shape us into who we are called to be. Uh, and I think that can be one of the hardest things because there's this myth about spiritual practice that it's supposed to feel really good. Um, and, so, to be able to engage in the discipline part is that ability to be present even when you don't feel anything at all.

Carla Long 14:53

Yeah, I've, I think I've heard you talk a little bit about this before and I, I think before when you talked about it, you called it like a, a spiritual dryness, you know, when you just feel, uh, kind of like the desert, when you're out there, and you just feel like the sand and wind blowing through you because it's really not feeling good at all. But what you're saying is that you continue on, that it's really important to continue on and keep trying even though it might feel dry that time?

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 15:23

Sure, well, and I think, you, you know, if you're experiencing a sense of dryness in your prayer or your spiritual life, um, it could be a couple of things. It could be that, um, maybe legitimately, that is not the right spiritual practice for you. That it is an invitation to reevaluate and try something new. Um, but that's a careful discernment because you don't want to just rush to the next thing, um, if you haven't really gone deeply into a practice yet. But it could also be because other aspects of your life are shifting. Um, sometimes when we grow deeper in our relationship with God and find the courage to ask those really tough questions, we can find ourselves feeling nothing at all or even like we're abandoned. And, uh, we don't have a lot of time here probably to talk about the depths of the dark night of the soul. But in every model and description of the spiritual journey, it leads through a time which can be disorienting, and isolating, and sometimes even painful. Um, and what's so important about it is that why is spiritual teachers tell us that going through these times where we don't feel God and still come to prayer, um, helps us, helps us recognize that there are moments that we get attached to the feeling of God instead of the real thing. And that might be really confusing. It's taken me a really long time to understand it. But there's moments in prayer when, um, I come expecting a certain feeling or experience. And the discipline is about engaging in prayer, um, even when I don't, because the desire to be with God is more than the desire to feel God. Does that make sense?

Carla Long 17:11

Oh, gosh, it does make sense. But it just sounds like something that's beyond me right now, you know, something that I don't know if I would be feeling God or just liking the feeling of God. That's, it's, that's pretty intense stuff, Katie.

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 17:27

Well, you know, I think, um, so here's, here's an example to, to maybe make it feel a little more accessible. Um, because I think that really at the heart of this is grace, right? Um, (Amen.) and that sense of, We don't have to be controlled, in control of the outcome, uh, but there's this invitation to, to allow spiritual practices to take us into a place of release into the Divine Presence. And, so, Father Thomas Keating is known for the practice of centering prayer, um, and in the Christian tradition, that's a form of contemplative prayer. Once when he was leading this practice, um, one of the participants came to him afterwards and said, I have absolutely failed at this prayer. Uh, and in centering prayer, typically what you do is you sit for 20 minutes and, uh, allow yourself to just be present and to release the thoughts and the images that come. And this participant said, I've failed at this prayer because in the last 20 minutes I have had 10,000 thoughts. And Father Keating's response was, How wonderful. Ten thousand opportunities to return to God, (Oh, wow.) and I, I love that image because I think it goes back to that idea of spiritual exercise of those parts of us that are not perhaps regularly trained to simply be present to God. And it also demonstrates that sense of grace that, um, you know, prayer can take us to some really deep places. Prayer can be a holy (. . .). It can take us to places we would rather not go in ourselves and in the world. It can invite us to release our attachments to images of ourselves and the world that we've grown familiar with. Um, and yet, there's this abundant sense of grace and presence that as we enter the process, whatever is happening within us, whether a sense of joy and assurance and peace or dryness and restlessness and this sense of trying to kind of work stuff out in our spiritual lives that God is present in all of that.

Carla Long 19:34

Wow. Well, that was a great example. That makes me actually feel a little bit better about my inability to meditate for longer than eight minutes. Eight minutes seems to be my absolute maximum at this moment, but it's called a practice for a reason, right? You're not supposed to be perfect at it immediately.

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 19:52

Absolutely. And I would say we're never perfect at it. So, there's hope for all of us.

Carla Long 20:00

Absolutely. Yes, that perfection thing, it's, it seems, um, kind of like a, a goal that you'll always fail at, so, you just always try and get a little bit better. (Yeah.) So, this has been a really great conversation so far. I've already learned a lot. And what I say in my podcast, at least, I don't know if the listeners ever learn anything, but I always learn something. So, hey, they're really good for me. So, I wanted to keep asking about this actual, these spiritual practices. So, I mean, you've talked about them and, and I just want to know what your thoughts are on what are the importance of them? Like, why are they important in someone's life?

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 20:39

Absolutely. I see a direct connection between who we are on the inside and how we behave on the outside. Um, there's, there's a story that I love sharing about a young man who attended a spiritual retreat in Kirtland. And at the end of the day, he observes that he felt totally spiritually exhausted, uh, which as the person leading the retreat, I was starting to feel kind of bad about thinking like, Oh, no, I, I made him do too much. But then he expressed, um, that, that the image for him was, like, just when you don't work out for a while, you are using muscles you don't normally use and you notice the ache. The engaging in prayer and inward reflection was revealing to him where he was spiritually out of shape, so to speak. And I really love that image of when we begin to practice living into the part of ourselves, that, uh, might not be the place that we live from on a regular basis, we can start to realize where we might be out of shape or where there might be some kind of ache or strain, uh, from when we're, we're invited to practice more intentionally. And I think about our world today and how important it is to intentionally exercise those parts of ourselves that would have us be more grounded in the sacred as the source of our action, um, more willing to listen to people than react in anger or fear, more open to others who are different from ourselves, more compassionate to the suffering of others. I think all of these things are habits of our heart that shape who we are in the world and that really seems to matter. Um, and, you know, I can notice a difference in myself when I am reacting from a place of anxiety, anger, or fear instead of being rooted and grounded in love. I'm guilty of projecting my own insecurities onto other people. I can harbor resentments that keep me from being real in relationship. And I know that I have attachments to certain ways of living, uh, and behaving that keep me from living as deeply in God's Spirit of justice and love as I desire. And, so, I think the spiritual journey is more than a self improvement project. And yet waking up to who we really are and who we are invited to become is such a critical part of responding to the most urgent issues of our time from a place of authenticity and love that is rooted in a larger vision.

Carla Long 23:09

Gosh, that just resonates with me so much. I, I have realized that on the days when I take time out, um, in the mornings to meditate or to breathe or just to be, um, those days I am a much kinder and loving and just a more wonderful person to be around. Uh, I realized that if an email might come in and, like, upsets me, I don't fire an email right back and, you know, make the problem worse. I sit with it, I think about why this person might have sent this and why I'm reacting in that way and, and then I, I take the time to live with it. It seems like my ego kind of gets out of the way when I am present with God and present with myself. But that seems like a really shallow use of spiritual practices.

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 24:00

No, I think that's a great example of, um, of really being willing to be present in the moment that, uh, that you could be real, reacting in anger to, um, to recognize what is the source of this? Where's this coming from? And if I react in this way, is this actually going to be living out of my truest self who I am discerning God is calling me to become? So, I think that's a great example.

Carla Long 24:30

And so maybe what, um, that, that, um, person meant when he said he's spiritually out of shape is that, you know, there are moments when I don't do any spiritual practices, and yet, I, I am reacting in a way and I'm, like, This is not the way I should be reacting, but I can't remember the way I should be reacting

so, it's time to get back into shape. I mean, I know that there's some, a disconnect there, but I just can't seem to get myself to it. So, maybe that means I'm out of shape, too.

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 25:00

Yeah, and I'm sure in some ways all of us are. (Yeah.) I, I think, think that this is the part that can be the most healing and liberating and also, um, really hard work, to be willing to be honest with ourselves about the things that we're encountering on a daily basis and, and how that moves within us. Um, whether that's reaction or anger or frustration, uh, or even joy and desire, it's important to pay attention to those things, too. Like, what, what is it about this situation that feels most life giving to me and if I pay attention to that, might that be revealing something of God's call and invitation in my life and how, um, I might be able to use my gifts for the blessing of the world. And, so, kind of, wherever we find ourselves on the emotional spectrum, whether it is, um, anger, or joy, all of that is material for us to be able to, uh, live in the world in a more aware and awake and grounded way.

Carla Long 26:05

Gosh, that's such a positive way to look at them, you know, that, you know, there's, there's something out there where God is calling you to and maybe you feel a yearning in that direction or you feel a yearning to find this call, spiritual practices could be a way to find where, find where God is calling you to. That's what I'm hearing you say. Is that what you're saying?

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 26:27

Absolutely, yeah. Every, I think that everything that happens to us is material for us to discover more about who we are in God. Um, and, so, yeah, when we're feeling a sense of deep joy about something, um, that's a great opportunity for us to ask, Why? Why is this causing me joy? Why is this bringing me life? And what can I do to make sure I tend to these, um, types of experiences so that, um, I can be more aligned with that divine vision for my life in the future?

Carla Long 27:01

Yeah. Um, I also feel like I've noticed in myself, at least, that when I don't want to do spiritual practices or when I'm really, um, blocking myself from doing them, there might be something that I want to hold on to and something that I don't want to give up, like, an image I have of myself or the image that I have of God, you know, I want God to be a specific way and if I do a spiritual practice and I find out that God is not that way, that means I have to, I'm wrong and I have to give something up and that can be kind of scary, in a way.

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 27:41

Absolutely. Yeah. I think that our, um, as we continue to grow more deeply in the Spirit, the ways that we encounter God grow with us. And, you know, just like what we were talking about earlier, how those moments can be really disorienting and isolating and, and scary. Um, there's still an invitation to use that as material for how we can continue to discover, um, may how new images of God are at work within us.

Carla Long 28:11

So, we've been talking all around spiritual practices. We've been talking about why people do them and why they're important and, and what they can, um, help us do in our lives. But really, I guess we haven't talked about what are spiritual practices. Like, what are some actual specific spiritual practices that people do or that you do, Katie, and, you know, just tell us a little bit more about what they are?

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 28:38

Absolutely. Um, so there are lots of different types of spiritual practices. Some are active. Some invite us to silent stillness. Some are private or personal. Some are communal or corporate. Um, there are classical spiritual practices that come from the shared wisdom of our Christian heritage like the Prayer of Examen, uh, which is a prayer that comes from the Ignatian tradition and invites you to prayerfully review your day searching for God in all things. Or Lectio Divina, uh, which is a way of dwelling deeply in the living word of Scripture as a form of prayer. There's centering prayer, which we've mentioned a couple of times already, which is a contemplative practice of being in the presence of the Divine. And there's many others throughout our Christian heritage.

Carla Long 29:30

So, those are, are those personal practices? Are those more communal practices that you've just discussed?

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 29:36

Yes. I would say, I would say they could be, uh, both or either. Um, you know, I have practiced actually all three of the ones that I listed Examen, Lectio Divina and centering prayer, both personally and in a group setting and, um, have found that I received the blessings of those in both settings in different ways.

Carla Long 30:01

Uh, yeah. You mentioned the Prayer of Examen and for a long time actually, since I've been a minister in Community of Christ, I've used a form of the Prayer of Examen, like, with junior high kids and senior high kids. And at the end of every day, you know, when we're in our cabins and we're laying in bed getting ready for sleep, my devotion question is almost always, What is the best part of your day? What is the worst part of your day? And tell me about a God moment of your day. And it is perhaps the most simple of all devotions I've ever done, but it is also the most effective because when you ask them to look for God, they always see God. There are very few times when, um, a junior high kid or a senior high kid will, will just pass because they're, like, I didn't see God at all today. That rarely happens because when you're intentional about looking for God, you find God in so many different places. (Absolutely.) So, I've really enjoyed doing the, well, kind of, kinda like a junior high version of the Prayer of Examen in camp atmospheres. It's just been really meaningful to the kids and meaningful to me to hear about their days as well. Usu, sometimes they're funny, sometimes they're sad, but they're always meaningful. So, I've really (Yeah.) appreciated that.

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 31:22

And, in some ways, I think the Prayer of Examen is like waking up and reverse. Uh, that, just like you were saying, it helps us to recognize where God was present throughout the day. And, uh, sometimes those are really obvious things and sometimes they're not. Uh, but when we wake up to how God was

present with us, as we're reflecting back on our day, that, again, uh, is part of that exercise in us that opens us up further the next day to be more attentive to where God may be present in the future.

Carla Long 31:56

That's absolutely true because, you know, we might do it on the first day and a, a camper might be brand new and had never even heard that question before. But the next night, they always have something to say because when you are intentional, God always reveals God's self in so many new ways and different ways in ways that we notice really. I feel like God is always revealing God's self, but we just happen to have more open eyes and see it a little bit more clearly. So, um, you've mentioned three spiritual practices. Uh, which one is your favorite? Which one do, is your go to spiritual practice? Do you have one of those?

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 32:37

Actually, um, I would say that my go to spiritual practice is journaling, which I have not listed yet. Um, but typically, my own spiritual practice is that I'll spend a little bit of time just in silence. Sometimes I'll enter into centering prayer. Um, and then I will usually spend time just simply journaling, um, prayers, or, as I'm processing experiences, or maybe I'm reflecting on, um, whatever my experience of silence brought up in me that feels important for me to, um, bring to prayer for that day. So, that tends to be my rhythm. But I have really felt a deep call lately, um, to release the wordiness of journaling which I'm recognizing as an attachment for me because it's, it's a way for me, and I love journaling. There's nothing wrong with journaling. It's a great spiritual practice. Um, but in me right now, I've noticed that, um, journaling is a way for me to feel like I have a sense of control over where it's going. And, so, I have felt even more drawn to, um, contemplative prayer forms like centering prayer and dwelling even more deeply in times of silence and word lessness as a way of connecting with God. So, that's a glimpse into my own personal, um, struggle and journey and prayer right now.

Carla Long 34:09

Well, thanks for sharing that. I, I appreciate hearing that because it, it sounds like that you, um, even you who's a spiritual formation specialist, you know, finds that you need to move on after a while and, and do you think that's true for a lot of people like something works for them for a little while and then maybe, maybe it's time to try something else to move on? Or, or, no?

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 34:31

I think, yeah, I think it's different for every person, but just like we've talked about earlier, um, as we grow in our spiritual journeys, our ways of encountering God grow with us. And there can be times when we use our routines as a crutch from going to that deeper place that God might be inviting us to go. Uh, and, so, that might be a good opportunity to say, Maybe this is time to try a new prayer form, um, that might take me into unfamiliar territory as a way of guiding me deeper in relationship with God.

Carla Long 35:09

Yeah, I think that's really important for people to hear. I also think it's important for people to hear, and you can tell me if this is wrong or not, but I remember my spiritual director once saying to me that, you know, if you start a spiritual practice and you realize that you're not very good at it, that things are not working out the way you think they should work out, and your expectations are all off, don't scold

yourself. You know, don't get angry with yourself, just, um, give yourself a little squeeze and just continue to bring yourself back, continue to bring yourself back just like, uh, was it Father Keating that said that, just bring yourself back and don't be angry?

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 35:51

Absolutely. Ten thousand opportunities to return to God, uh, which I think is such a great way of looking at it. And it also reminds me, um, our previous Presiding Evangelist, Dave Brock, has, uh, said, Any practice worth doing is worth doing poorly, (Oh.) which I really love because I think it's important to embrace humility and even humor as part of the process of growth, um, and to be gentle with ourselves to recognize that this isn't about my success in prayer. This is about my desire, my yearning to connect with God. And anytime that I'm exercising that yearning, even if I'm clumsy in doing it, God embraces that. And, uh, there's no way that we can ever fail at prayer if we come into those experiences with that intention.

Carla Long 36:44

Well, I, I have already admitted that, um, I'm not great at meditating and I've only done it for eight minutes. But every single time I set myself up for meditating, I actually bought a meditation pillow, which was like \$40, which is a ton of money, because I thought, you know, maybe if I spent \$40 then I'd actually do it. And I have this, this candle, it smells like cupcakes, I like cupcakes and, and, you know, like, I always set myself up. I set a timer for 20 minutes on my phone, I sit on my meditation pillow, I light my cupcake candle, and I start to, you know, I start breathing, and I start just trying to get there. And you know, after a while, I do get into it. And then, then all of a sudden, I'm done. I'm like, Oh, my gosh. I can't believe 20 minutes went by so fast. And every single time I look at my phone and it's only been eight minutes, every single time. I thought I was doing so well and really going, but eight minutes seems to be my limit at this moment. But I thought I was getting there. So, I kind of have to laugh at myself, as you said, and just try and continue and keep going next time with my cupcake candle and my meditation pillow.

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 37:49

Absolutely. UH, and, you know, I find that for myself, like, for example, when I started a spiritual direction program, the first time that I met with all of these, um, other people that were in my cohort, I felt this tremendous sense of insecurity, like, I need to look like I'm a really spiritual person in a group of really spiritual people. Uh, but you know, what I've really found and what I'm trying to embrace is that I don't have to worry about being the image of what I think spiritual has to look like, um, but the invitation is to just be me and to enter prayer as I am, attentive to that deepest desire and trusting that God's presence, whether I can feel it or not, is enough. Um, and so if that means eight minutes on a meditation pillow with a cupcake candle, then that's great. We bring what we are, who we are at this moment in our lives into that intention to be with God and God receives us in those spaces.

Carla Long 38:54

Whew. Thank goodness. Well, this has been really good information. And I, and I hope that this conversation has encouraged people to, you know, maybe just try something new and get out there and try something different. And, so, like, if someone were hearing about spiritual practices or spiritual disciplines for the very first time and they really wanted to try one and, and do something, you know,

what do they need to get started? You know, are there some resources they can look at to, to, you know, maybe have some ideas of what to do? Um, do you have anything like that?

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 39:33

Yes. So, first, I'll say there are tons of different types of spiritual practices and that can feel really overwhelming at first. Um, and you might find that there are one or two practices that really speak to you that you want to try to commit to over a period of time. Remember, um, that the spiritual practices are about both awakening to God's presence and also that discipline of being with God in a, in a deeper way over time. And, so, I always recommend trying one thing at a time for a while and allowing yourself the freedom to maybe not totally get it at first, recognizing that when we're trying a new practice it can take, uh, practice for it to feel natural. Um, sometimes when I'm engaging in a new prayer form, I find that I'm analyzing myself the whole time and asking, Am I doing this right? Uh, and, just as we've been talking about, I think that's okay. Um, the invitation is not to give up on a practice because you don't feel like you know what you're doing right away. Uh, recognizing that we come to God clumsy and with our yearnings and with our aching and with our hope, and there is no way that we can fail, um, because however we come to God, we are already in God's presence. And just like we were talking about with Father Keating, every distraction, uh, every sense of failure is an opportunity to return again to that intention to be with God. Um, and, so, just in terms of as you're sorting through the mass amount of spiritual practices that are out there, pay attention to what you really feel drawn to and just stick with it for a while and see where it takes you. Um, there's also a lot of really excellent resources for spiritual practices. From a Community of Christ lens, you can find practices on the website at cofchrist.org. Um, or we have for the spiritual formation center in Kirtland, Ohio, um, a website, spiritualformationcenter.org, that has lots of practices and resources. And also, especially for more corporate or communal spiritual practices, missionalleaders.org is a great website. Um, there's also great websites from our ecumenical tradition, like Ignatianspirituality.com, and spiritualityandpractice.com. Um, and there's tons of books, too, uh, so, I won't go into my whole list of books. But I will say that at the spiritualformationcenter.org website, um, there is a resource list that if you're looking for books that, uh, might help you continue to grow in your spiritual journey or just get started. Um, it, looking at what spiritual practices are available, you can find those there.

Carla Long 42:24

Wow, that was a lot. That was, that's, that's a, that's a good solid list for people to get started. So, you said cofchrist.org. Do they just go to the search bar and type in spiritual practices? Will that get them maybe, uh, somewhere? Do you know?

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 42:40

Yeah. You should be able to type spiritual practices in the search bar. Um, or if you go to the spiritual formation page, there is a spiritual practices section. And next to the spiritual practices section is also the Daily Bread section. So, (Oh, great!) that's another community for spiritual practice.

Carla Long 42:58

Awesome. Thanks. O, okay, so, there's lots of different websites that people can go to, which is really, really good. What else, what do people need to get started? Any, like, actual items or really just a willingness to go for it?

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 43:12

Well, you're welcome to buy, um, a meditation cushion and a delicious scented candle if you would like. (Absolutely you can.) Uh, some people find prayer beads really helpful. If you're a physical, tangible person, then sometimes those symbols, um, can be really helpful for helping you create set aside space for prayer. Uh, some people create, um, little worship centers in their home as a place where they can go and, um, really spend the time there and have a focal point for their time of prayer. And all of that is wonderful, but none of it is necessary. Um, so, just based on who you are, and how you connect, you might find symbols like that helpful, uh, or you might find them distracting. Um, but basically, all you need is yourself, you're yearning for God, and the willingness to try to connect with God in a deeper way.

Carla Long 44:12

Yeah, that sounds pretty awesome. Uh, well, Katie, we've reached close to the end of our time together. Is there anything that we didn't talk about that you want people to know? Or is there anything that you feel like you want to clarify or anything else you want to say?

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 44:30

Actually, I think, to end where we started might be a good place that no one can walk the spiritual journey for us. And yet we never walk it alone. And I think that's really important. Um, taking responsibility in a sacred way for my own spiritual journey, recognizing that I can't depend on other people to do that work for me is really critical. And yet having spiritual companions to walk the way with me is equally critical. That's why balancing the personal and the communal, um, of spiritual practice is so essential. And, so, I would also recommend finding those spiritual companions in your life. Um, whether that's through the more formal ecumenical tradition of spiritual direction that allows us to explore our spiritual journeys in confidential relationship. Um, or whether that's, if you're in Community of Christ, finding an evangelist, maybe even going through the process of having an evangelist blessing as a way of walking with another person to discover God's presence and invitation in your life. Or it might be a best friend or a family member or just somebody who you enjoy walking the spiritual path with. Um, I think that having those people to continue to ground us and to be able to process our experiences and to help us to grow are really important on a spiritual journey.

Carla Long 46:06

Well, thank you for that. And thank you so much for sharing with us this last hour or so. I, I really appreciate that you're, you won't like that I'm saying this, but your expertise in this subject is, you've made, um, a talk about something that might be scary to people something, uh, something that people may now feel like they can do. And I think that's a really important job of a spiritual formation specialist, to make it, to make spiritual practices not so out there and scary, but something that everyone can do. And, you know, and let us know that it's okay to fail and, or not be good at it and just to continue on. So, I really appreciate you talking with u, me today and, on this new series that we have called Holy Grounds. And, um, I'm really excited to learn more about different spiritual practices that people do and why they do them. So thank you for that introduction.

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 47:01

Yeah, I'm really grateful for the opportunity to be here and I'm looking forward to listening to the rest of this series to hear what practices are meaningful for other people.

Carla Long 47:09

Me too. And, so, listeners, thank you for listening and, um, I hope that you'll continue to listen to this series Holy Grounds. Thanks again, Katie.

Katie Harmon-Mclaughlin 47:21

Thank you.

Josh Mangelson 47:44

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.