

Percolating on Faith Liberation Theodicy

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

liberation theodicy, suffering, theology, God, Jesus, injustice, evil, power.

SPEAKERS

Tony Chvala-Smith, Carla Long, Blake Smith, Charmaine Chvala-Smith

Blake Smith 00:18

Hey, Faith Unfiltered Podcast listeners. This is Blake Smith, Project Manager for Faith Unfiltered. With the continued presence of violence taking place, not only around the world, but right here in the United States--from mass shootings, ICE raids and political violence to the rise of Christian nationalism and the proliferation of hate groups and hate speech--we find many people asking the question why, and though we may not have the answers to why we thought it would be timely for us to repost this episode on Liberation theodicy, featuring host Carla long and guest Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith. We hope this conversation will be helpful to you, our listeners, as you navigate the presence of suffering and evil in your day-to-day journey with Christ and in the world.

Carla Long 01:06

Hello, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host, Carla Long and you're listening to Percolating on Faith, a series where we talk about super smart things and you walk away feeling smart for a really long time. We're here with our wonderful, wonderful guests, Charmaine and Tony Chvala-Smith. Hello, Charmaine. Hello, Tony.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:24

Hi, Carla. Good to be with you.

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:26

Hi, Carla. And we always feel a little smarter after we do these, too, I, I guess. I think we do.

Carla Long 01:31

You don't feel like all your smarts just like leak out into this podcast?

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:35

Well, it's leaking out, but then we're stuffing it right back in. So, that's, that accounts for

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:24

It's just being in your presence, Carla. That's what does it.

Carla Long 01:42

Oh, my goodness. That's not true. But I'll take it. Uh, thank you so much. Uh, today we're going to be talking about Liberation Theodicy. And if you don't know what a theodicy is, first of all, we're going to tell you and second of all, you should listen to the other, um, podcasts that we've had about theodicies. There have been a lot because there's a lot of different types. There's been about five or so, we think.

So, before we jump into Liberation Theodicy, what is a theodicy? Just being in your presence, Carla. That's what does it.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:13

So, our go-to definition is that it's, it's kind of, the theodicy, a theodicy starts with a question. What is the relationship between God and the suffering and evil that we find in the world? So, that's the question, and then there's like four prongs to this question, four implications of this question. And we put those in the, in the shape of, of questions as well. Why are suffering and evil so present in human experience and, and in the world? Second one, why did God create a world in which suffering and evil are possible? Three, what does this say about the nature of God? And four, why doesn't God protect us from evil and suffering? Or, another way to, to, another angle to go on that is or where is God when we are suffering? And, so, as we looked at each of these theodicies or, like today, a group of theodicies really, um, we, um, we try to address some of those questions. So, a theodicy is kind of a theoretical way of answering one or more of, of those four questions that I just mentioned.

Tony Chvala-Smith 03:36

And I think it's really important to stress that, uh, a theodicy can never be treated as the answer to the problem of suffering and evil. Um, and thinking of it as a theoretical approach really is helpful because that keeps reminding us that we're in the presence of a variety of mysteries. The biggest of the mysteries is the mystery we call God and our faith claims and experience about God as loving, wise, etc. But then also, we're in the, the presence of a mystery that we call evil, uh, which is pretty easy to see, especially if you look at human history and human experience. So, we, we don't want to say that a theory solves these problems because when people are in the middle of suffering and really hurting and have horrible losses in their life, the last thing they need is a theory. So, so, yeah, the, the theoretical approach does give us some different handholds for dealing with the reality of the questions.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 04:33

Yeah, and so this is our sixth (sixth, I think.) and so the theodicies we've already looked at are the Irenaean, the Augustinian, protest theodicy, Jesus' narrative theodicy, and process theodicy. So, actually, that's 1, 2, 3, 4. So, this is the sixth. Yeah.

Tony Chvala-Smith 04:54

And then we had an initial one on why do bad things happen, happen? So, so yeah, so this, this one will kind of round out our, our approach, our, round out our series, and it's a good one to end on. And, of course, we'll, we'll just, we keep foot, footnoting Migliore "Faith Seeking Understanding" who gives great introductions to all these, and then Bradley Hansen's "Introduction to Christian Theology," which we rely on a lot, and plus a lot of other stuff that we read, too, too, too numerous to name here, but, but we may occasionally today throw in some book titles for people who are interested, so. So, let's jump in, then, Carla to liberation theodicy or we'll say liberation theodicies. There's a variety here clustered around some ideas. So,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 05:40

And basically we start with the idea that liberation theologies, um, just very naturally take us into places where we look at what is the nature of suffering and pain and, and evil in the world. And this one, probably more than others, um, gives some explanation for some of the evil and injustice in the world.

Tony Chvala-Smith 06:06

So this, this is an approach to the problem of suffering and evil recognizes that built into human cultures and systems (ie by human beings) is unfairness and injustice, that privilege some people and marginalize others. Sometimes a lot of others. And this, this unfairness and injustice are major causes of suffering in the world. Now, this is not a, a, a meta explanation. Not all suffering that comes in the world, I mean, if, if, if a tree, if a tree falls on your, your house in a storm, and, you know, and, and damages the house, injures family members or even kills some members, that may not easily be attributable to human injustice. It may be a, a natural act and we live in a world where we're vulnerable to that kind of stuff. So, but what, what liberation theodicies are interested in is the kinds of suffering and evil that have human systemic causes where, where people create systems and perpetuate

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 07:04

intentionally. Intentionality is a big part of that. So, uh, so liberation theodicies are trying to address and then challenge and, one more piece, change. So, there's an action part in this theodicy to change both the suffering, uh, the evil, and the pain that are caused by these unjust systems and try to change the systems themselves.

Tony Chvala-Smith 07:33

So Charmaine mentioned that liberation theodicies kind of flow out of theologies of liberation and, uh, theologies of liberation, there's a variety of them. They have, they all have as kind of their central or shared concern, how to apply the resources of the Christian faith to the, the, the prospect, prospect of liberating people from unjust or oppressive systems, whether their political, economic, uh, social, gender, racial, religious, whatever. Um, so, for example, black liberation theology, um, feminist theologies, womanist theologies which are, in a sense, black women's experience, uh, in a liberation vein. Uh, Latin American liberation theologies, which are old and vener, venerable at this point. And then Mujerista theology, which is, for example, which is Latin American women theologians thinking about such suffering from their perspective. Uh, there's a Korean theology called Minjung theology, uh, eco theology, eco feminist theology, queer theology, post colonial theology. There's a lot of these that have some kind of liberative lens to them. And if we back up into the 19th century, uh, people like Frederick Douglass in the United States, uh, and Walter Rauschenbusch, great social gospel theologian. They were already doing some of this kind of, kind of work, uh, before, before the 20th century, uh, liberation theologies got, got going. So, but they all have the central concern, Does Christianity have anything to say and contribute to the problem of human suffering? Um, excuse me, other than, Well, when you die, you're going to be okay, right? Uh, there's got to be more to contribute. And, so, uh, liberation theologies have been on that for a long time and a liberation theodicy then uses liberation lenses to deal with the problem of suffering and evil.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 09:26

Because of that, Jesus is often the prime focus of many liberation theodicies because, um, it's very easy to see Jesus as one who understood and was trying to unravel the systemic injustices of his time. You know, if you think of the judgment and prejudice that his religious culture had toward, like the woman who was washing his feet, who was supposedly a, a prostitute, in Luke 7, you know, he holds her up in conversation as a good example of what it means to accept God's love. You know, he is acknowledging her personhood, her, you know, there's dignity and there's respect there. And he's going beyond that to say, this woman who you are despising, and looking down on is the best example here of what it means to accept God's love and forgiveness. Um, you know, other examples would be the, the Samaritan woman at the well in the Gospel of John, um, who, um, both Jews, Jews would look

down on him for having had this conversation. And her own people, uh, had judged her and seen her as unfit to be in their midst. And yet she becomes the, the, uh, one who invites her whole village to, to know Jesus. Uh, so, is it that switch again, uh, these places where people are, um, placed low on the, on the bottom rungs of society? And Jesus says, No, this is the person who brings the message. Um, and another one might be Jesus' parable about the rich man and Lazarus, which I always love that one because the rich man even after he dies, still thinks he has privilege and that it matters. And, and, so Jesus is, like, putting the spotlight on what this rich guy figures he deserves from the universe just because of who he is. And Jesus goes, No, you know, Lazarus, Lazarus is the one who is nearest to God, um, which would have been, oh my goodness, scandalous for, for those who saw themselves as, you know, religious or pious or, or well thought of in their culture. So, I just love how Jesus keeps doing this. It's like, nana nana, you all who think you're extra special and good, you know, not so much. And, or think about Jesus, how he disregards cultural fears and exclusions by touching lepers and, uh, freeing them, you know, giving them back their personhood and letting them, uh, (. . .) even before he brings healing to them. He, he helps them know their value as human beings, whether by touching them, acknowledging them, um, taking them seriously. So, so Jesus is, for many of these, uh, both the liberation theologies and then the theodicies, Jesus is kind of a focal point.

Tony Chvala-Smith 12:55

So, what we'll do next, we'll just give some other, like, key, key points on liberation theodicy. And this time we, what we've done with our, with our, in our notes is we've, we've given some little, little bolded headings that will be (hopefully) hopefully, for listeners, will be like the, the short version of each of these poi, points. So, for example, the, the first of our points is the marginalized see what God is about. The marginalizers don't. So, um, liberation theology looks to the example of Jesus and the Hebrew prophets, um, as its basis for affirming the dignity of all persons, but especially those, especially those marginalized, shoved to the sides, pushed to the corners, (taken advantage of) by society's institutions, cultures, and religious, religious, uh, organizations and so on. Jesus, Jesus is all over that. The Hebrew prophets were all over that. And also the Hebrew prophets were especially, uh, vocal about religion used in the service of oppression of others. So, um, a liberation theology and the theodicies that come from it believe that those who, whose who experience being treated as less than are the ones who, most likely, that clearly grasp, accepting, loving, liberating power of God, uh, which is most easily seen in Christ. They're the ones that are going to get it. Um, and that's, that's a really important thing here because dealing with systemic suffering, oppression, and evil, uh, requires us, uh, to pay attention and listen to those who are experiencing that and to pay attention to their experience of God in the midst of that.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 14:37

So a second characteristic, uh, faith equals challenging injustice. So, in these theologies, and, therefore, in the theodicies, um, they're reinterpreting aspects of Christian faith, such as scripture and tradition, in ways that empower the oppressed and the voiceless and the disenfranchised and encourage people to challenge and change systems that dehumanize them and others. So, this is, in this, one of these characteristics of liberation theodicies is that it's about action. It's not just about some ideas in our heads that we carry around and feel good about because, Oh, yes, I understand this. No, it's, doesn't mean anything, if we're not acting on it. And if we're not trying to find ways here and now to, um, lessen, um, suffering, to lessen injustice, and to, to bring in, in some ways, this is the most kingdom of God the theodicies. It's about bringing the kingdom of God here now actively, um, because we see, recognize in the systems, the ways that it is dehumanizing, that it's dismissive.

Tony Chvala-Smith 15:57

So our, our, the next heading we would say is that, uh, God's justice in the here and now. That's what's so important in liberation theodicies. So, liberation theodicies will reject, uh, interpretations of suffering that see faith in God is primarily about a reward in the afterlife. You just have to put up with it here. Things will be better when you die. You know, pie, pie and pie in the sky by and by, you know. Liberation theodicies say that's, that's a smokescreen that covers up the privilege of the privileged and, uh, God is instead acting in our presence, in our, in our midst to help us be free from that. So, liberation theodicy insists that God wants people to fight for and establish justice in this world. And, so, you know, Community of Christ people, I think, when they, when they hear that they might say, Ah, that connects, that ought to connect to some of our kingdom of God talk. Well, indeed it, it does. And one of the first people to see that in our tradition was Fred M. Smith back in the early 20th century, who, who was very well read in social gospel theology, and who, who talked openly and in his sermons about how the, how Christianity ought to be a force for helping the laborers, peop, you know, the people in, who, who worked, not just management, get fair wages and just treatment. So, that's pretty, pretty liberative thing for, uh, one of our presidents to have said back in the earliest, early 20th century, but it's not about then and there, it's about here now. And, so, process theodicies want, want to do whatever they can to make a difference to suf, about suffering right now.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 17:33

This is similar to what I was saying earlier, but it's about action, not theories. So liberation theodocies are interested in, in practical, in ethical actions that will produce equity and justice. They're not usually interested in the theoretical questions about the nature or the origins of evil or of suffering, necessarily. Sometimes that's, I mean, there's not, there's this pre, there's this acknowledgement that it is the systems that are around us and within us. Um, and, so, the question, If God is all powerful and all loving, why does God allow evil and suffering, that it's, that's not helpful in liberation theodocies because it's not about determine, trying to determine, uh, who God is, but it is about how can we act on what we know or have experienced of God?

Tony Chvala-Smith 18:30

And that's the kind of question that the educated privileged people get to ask because they're doing just fine, right? Let's, let's think theoretically about this issue, uh, and are not having to deal with horrible treatment in the factory or, uh, sexual abuse and harassment and whatever. They're not having to deal with that. Uh, so, yeah.

Carla Long 18:53

And even in, like, the, the most shallowest way, you know, like, a lot of people who are marginalized may wonder where their next meal is coming from. They wonder where they're going to sleep at night. They don't have the time to even think, to even think about that kind of stuff. Like, all, a lot of their, um, brain space is taken up by how am I surviving?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:14

And that's especially true with people who have trauma and, and are just surviving, is that they, they can't, they're so nec, necessarily tied into how do I get my next meal? How do I take care of my children? How do we have a place to live? Um, they can't step back and look at these bigger issues. But quite often, they see and feel these systems that are causing pain and suffering and they often can identify with what's being said in these theodocies, um, without having to, to have, to have a degree of any kind to, to be able to understand it.

Tony Chvala-Smith 20:02

And, and the liberation theologian is going to say that, First of all, let's get them fed. (Um-hmm.) And the second thing liberation theology is going to say, of it's very many types, is, And then let's figure out why they're hungry? And then we might need to get involved politically (Um-hmm.) because it's very likely, for example, the United States are a, a, a country that's, that's awash in food, why, why are so many school aged kids hungry all the time? Why is, why is food a, a, a short commodity for, for many people who are like the working poor and so on. Why are their working poor? Well, li, liberation theodicy says, It's not just that there's a hunger problem. It's that there's a justice problem. And so we're going to deal with that, too. And we're going to name it and deal with it. So.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 20:47

And in relation to that whole thing about the question of, you know, if, if God is all loving and all powerful, how could an all loving all powerful God allow suffering, um, James Cone, who's a black liberation, uh, theologian, uh, says, and that we, and this is from Migliore's book, uh, "Faith Seeking Understanding," he, he quote, he says of, of James Cone, He refuses to diminish either the divine power or the divine goodness of God in order to arrive at an intellectually satisfying resolution of the dilemma. So, it's not about making it a nice tidy idea in our heads so we can feel good about it. It's, uh, it's about letting the rawness of it all, um, be present and, and not, not trying to cover it over.

Tony Chvala-Smith 21:35

Yeah, and I think if anybody wants to, to dive into some of these kinds of theologies and theodicies, James Cohen is, like, the, the classic, the classic theologian to read here. I think he's really, really good. So, anoth, the next point we want to make, this is true of especially Latin American liberation theology, but other, other types, um, God stands with the oppressed and the poor. Um, so, liberation, theodicy insists that God actively chooses to be present with the poor and oppressed peoples of the earth in their suffering. And here's the thing that, that usually bothers middle class white people, God takes their side, right. We think of God, you know, we've, we've dealt with this in Sunday school classes before, where, where, you know, uh, (People say, God is no respecter of persons.) I'm no respecter of persons and God treats everybody equally. It's like, No one should read the Bible a little close, more closely. God is found suffering with the poor in the prophets. Jesus in other parts of the New Testament. And so liberation theologians long ago developed, uh, what they called the, the preferential option for the poor. That is,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 22:44

as a way of understanding (Yeah.) God's having chosen the poor to identify with and to stand with.

Tony Chvala-Smith 22:50

Uh, and that's, this, this you can find plenty of, um, very biblical support for, but the idea here is that not that God loves the less rich, uh, lov, loves the rich less. It's that God aligns with the poor and experiences things with them which then requires, ought to require the rich to repent. That's how this works in liberation theology and, and so, um, it's, it matters, it matters a lot. Uh, what we think about God affects all kinds of aspects of our life. And it matters a lot if we think that God will be, God will be found first in the poor child in a barrio in Latin America, uh, who's struggling every day just to survive. Uh, if we look there to see God first, that should have an impact on our thinking and our behavior.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 23:42

And kind of going along with that is our next one which is, Jesus is God with us in our suffering. And most expressions of liberation theologies believe that God, uh, that Jesus reveals God's special concern for those who suffer and Jesus' own unjust death on the cross reveals a God who's experienced marginalization and thus who, who understands and wants to accompany those who are oppressed in the world. Um, in Jesus, again, as we said earlier, God takes the side of the poor, the oppressed, the tortured, the abused, etc.

Tony Chvala-Smith 24:27

And then, our, our next one, a, a, a heading for it would be, No to religiously sponsored passivity. Right? So, liberation theologies would reject interpretations of Christianity that teach people to just submit to injustice or just tolerate unjust or oppressive governments or systems or relationships. Um, it's, it's not, it's not about tolerating evil here. Instead, these theologies would, would focus on Jesus' message about seeking to create God's kingdom, God's reign of justice and peace here on Earth. Uh, and some liberation theologies, uh, focus on the, will, will focus especially on the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus because they find there, like, a major theological resources for facing suffering and combating evil structures. For example, if they, if an evil empire, with the collusion of religious authorities, uh, murdered Jesus in public and on Easter, God raised Jesus from the dead, hmm, that says about, something about where it goes as priorities are and that for, for many liberation theologians that gives a whole new set of images and a kind of courage to, to stop being passive in the face of evil and injustice in the world. Um, back to James Cone for a sec, for a second, uh, Mi, uh, Migliore, quoting Migliore again here, he says Co, Cone interprets the biblical tradition with as many approaches to the problem of evil as a call to courageous human participation in God's struggle against suffering rather than a pious acquiescence to suffering. End quote. There's all kinds of suffering evil in the world that are, that have human causes and acquiescing to it, or just, quote, unquote, taking it, is not a Christian virtue. In other words, what the liberation theologian was saying. Um, it's, it's clapping your hands for the powers that are oppressing you. And then, uh, Cone himself says that God grants power to the powerless to fight here and now for the freedom they know to be theirs in Jesus' cross and resurrection. In other words, be, for Cone, especially Jesus' cross and resurrection is kind of the Magna Carta of our freedom. And, and therefore, it, that, that story and the spiritual power that comes from it, gives us the power to fight for a freedom that has already been given, but is being stamped on by oppressive powers that don't want to let that happen. So, so anyway, that, that, this is kind of a, a quick overview of liberation theologies. It's about action. It's about doing whatever we can, we'll say in the name of Jesus, to change the systems that create, uh, some kinds of human suffering and abuse. And we might add here that it's, this is getting to be a more complicated picture in the sense that we used to distinguish, you know, uh, moral evil from natural evil, right? Natural evil was, uh, somebody struck by lightning and killed. That's really sad, uh, un, unless they were intentionally wearing golf shoes out in the storm, there was probably nothing they could, they, they could have been, it just happened, right? We used to say that was natural evil. And then moral evil is humanly caused stuff. Well, the climate crisis we're in is actually confusing the lines here because if, if someone, i, if people die because of horrible, horrible storms we have been warned for 30 years about because of human activity that creates climate change, then is natural evil any longer a category there, right? So, we have to, we have to be able to, to say that those lines have become blurred by human activity. So, liberation theologies want to, want to deal with whatever human beings have complicity in that causes pain and suffering for other human

beings. That doesn't mean that accidents won't happen, that disease won't happen. Um, you know, that, that, that

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 25:25

individuals might do things that are evil and bad (Right.) in, in, by, by themselves.

Tony Chvala-Smith 28:32

But there are all kinds a, a many, many forms of pain in human experience that are caused by others that are connected to political, economic, uh, gender, and racial systems that ought not be. And, so, liberation theodicies want to say, Let's name those and, and let's push against them.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 28:59

So, if you want to get a sense of what some of these theodicies look like, um, if, if, uh, if movies are a place that you go to kind of get a good sense of something, the movie, uh, Romero gives a very good example of how do you live out a, um, a Latin American liberation thoedicy and you'll see that in the person of Romero. Um, but also, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., you know, what, what about his writings and his sermons and, um, not just his sermons, but his speeches, too, that are doing exactly this, are pointing to the systems that are intentionally oppressing people. Um, Elizabeth Johnson, who is, uh, an (Roman Catholic), is Roman Catholic, but she's an eco feminist. And, uh, so, she, she speaks of, um, you know, what are we doing to the Earth and ourselves? Um, James Cone we've already mentioned. Uh, Ebony Marshall Turman is a, a, a womanist theologian who, uh, is just fun to listen to if you're, just want to take a peek on YouTube.

Tony Chvala-Smith 30:20

Her sermons are really powerful.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 30:22

Uh, other, other people that might help you get a sense of this would be someone like, um, Yvette Flunder in her book, Where the Edges Gather. And, um, she has a series of sermons there that use scripture in ways that really, um, help us get at, um, how do we, how can we act, how can we feel, how can we think in ways that bring liberation to people?

Tony Chvala-Smith 30:55

And if, and if anybody's interested in, in womanist theology, Stephanie Mitchem's book, Introducing Womanist Theology is a good place to start. And then, uh, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Fernando Segovia's Hispanic/Latino Theology. That's, that's a great collection of, of stuff on, uh, various forms of Latino, Latinx kinds of theology that deal with many of the issues of justice, injustice and suffering. So, lots of places to go. (. . .) there's many different kinds. And, uh, uh, you're only limited by how much reading time you have on this one.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 31:37

Or watching time because, again, there's some very good movies that would help you see what this looks like, um, and get a feel for how it can matter in the world.

Tony Chvala-Smith 31:48

So, next place we'll go is, I'll do some reflecting on how to preach a liberation theodicy and then we'll go on to how to pray liberation theodicy. And then we'll just see, Carla, if you have any questions or pushbacks or whatever we want to do. So, how to preach a liberation theodicy. And this will be the last time people hear me say this, but we don't actually preach theodicies because they're, they're theoretical constructs, at least per se, we don't. Um, and as I've said, again, you have people sitting in a congregation any given morning, uh, whether that's in person or on Zoom, um, who are dealing with, like, all kinds of horrible things that they, eh, perhaps have not even been able to voice or fear voicing. There's, there's pain, struggle, loss. Uh, much of it connected to justice and injustice, too. Um, and, so, the last thing people need to hear from the pulpit is somebody with an authoritative voice trying to say, Here's the answer to the problem of suffering and evil for you. Right? That's, so we don't preach theodicies like that. Um, we don't have elixirs or quick fixes. Um, liberation theodicy, though, can give you some lenses for how to approach the task of preaching. So, I mean, in, in one particular way, or one, one very real way, all preaching should be liberative. Meaning it should aim, aim to help free people from binding forces and structures and for, and this is really important in Christian theology, freed from, but what for? Freed for lives lived more fully. It opens to God, neighbor, enemy, self, creation. Um, or, in other words, we're freed from the things that bind us to live for, not self, but the reign of God as embodied in Jesus. Really important to keep those two things together. Um, we're not freed from stuff to have a free for all. Right? Uh, it's, it's to live in, in love, which is self giving concern for others and for the planet. So, a, a liberation, all preaching should be liberative in that way regardless of whether it uses a liberation lens or not. Another thing is that as a particular lens, this theodicy, would reject, uh, preaching that explicitly or implicitly encourages passivity in the face of humanly caused or perpetuated evil and injustice in the world. Um, it's you, you know, when, when the whole nation has witnessed on TV a racist murder of an African American by a white policeman, which we did a couple of years ago, um, the, the last, the last, the worst thing to happen on Sunday morning after that is for somebody to say nothing. Right? Because that's, that's a, that becomes a form of complicity in the structure that, that made that even possible. So, this, this lens, then, as I said, it, it rejects, it helps us reject the idea that we, we just are ethically neutral or passive in the face of, of, uh, the kinds of evil and injustice human beings perpetuate in the world. Another thing is that, uh, s, salvation is a central word in Christian theology. But here's the problem with the word salvation. Layer upon layer of pietistic, individualistic, evangelical, heaven talk has buried it, has buried this Biblical sense in centuries of self righteous debris. And, so, we, uh, the term salvation kind of makes a lot of us just pucker up when we hear it. It's, it's a, it's an unpleasant term and that's because of this layer upon layer of, Are you saved? Are you saved? Are you going to heaven blah, blah, blah? The problem is that from the, liberation theod, theodicies see the problem there, right? That lens then would help us keep in mind that salvation in biblical terms is really about liberation. I sometimes think if we, if, in, in English translations we should just simply not use the word salvation wherever the, the word, whatever, whatever word is in Hebrew or Greek is there, we should use the word liberation because that includes in the, in the Bible, in most cases, it includes the political, the social, the economic, as well as the individual sense. And, so, liberation lens can help us recover that salvation is a big term, not a narrow, self interested term. Um, then another thing is that a liberation theo, theodicy lens can help the preacher adjust our vision to the political, social, economic, and gender dimensions that are in biblical texts. These texts have those dimensions in them. And, and, so, this lens can help us be aware, not only of, you know, my own privilege as a preacher, because, because when I stand up to preach, there's a sort of, uh, varieties of, of layers of privilege going on there. But also, it can help us be aware as we do our exegesis and prep, preparation, uh, to, to preach, to pay attention to things we're not used to paying attention to if we're a

privileged person, like maybe the gender dynamics or the racial dynamics or ethnic dynamics that are in the text. So, liberation lens can help us pay attention better. Um, might also say, this is following up on something Charmaine just mentioned, to, that, read or listen to some of Martin Luther King's or Eboni Marshall Turman's sermons and, and pay attention to how they use biblical themes in ways that are faithful to the texts, but also show in and through those texts, the divine call to work against injustice. Um, often biblical texts are doing two things at once. And, so, if you listen to good liberation preachers, you'll see how they pick up on that. And that's a good thing to, a good skill to learn. Um, and then, um, further, a lib, a liberation lens can help a sermon, uh, do two other complex things at the, at the once. The first thing, this is hard, to name, the principalities and powers that hold the church cultures, people captive. You know, we can't even seem sometimes like, like racism, um, and sexism, so on, to help, to help us name that. And then liberation lens can also help us, help empower us to reject the passive victim status, that there's, you know, there's nothing we can do really about racism. It's all individual choice, we can't do anything about it. Or we can't, we can't do anything about climate change, or this, this kind of passive victim status that lets us off the hook. Um, a liberation lens would say, No, follow the Bible, you're not off the hook on this. Um, we have to embrace God's work in creating a new future that leads toward the reign of God. Um, so, in other words, those two things have to happen at once. And liberation lenses can help us do that. Name the, name the principalities and powers and then help people reject that we're just passive victims in their, in face of them. Uh, so, I think that's really, really, really important, um, you know, that, that great line in the, the Lord's, the Lord's Prayer, Let your kingdom come, exclamation point. Let your will be done on earth. And what's implied there is by us, uh, as it is in heaven, right? So, so, uh, liberation lenses can help us see and, and, and get our minds around some of those things which can then change the texture of, of preaching.

Carla Long 39:55

Um, I think a lot of what you said is super duper important. But, um, the thing that sticks out to me the most is talking about this from the pulpit and mentioning this from the pulpit. Um, actually just, you know, you said, you know, after there's been an event that, that has shown an injustice, saying it from the pulpit is really, really important. And it should not matter our political identity, at least here in the United States which is, is very polarized right now. It should not matter that, if we, uh, I hear you say, correct me if I'm wrong, that as Christians, um, we, we should call out injustice whenever we see it and wherever we see it even if it sounds different to a Democrat's ears or a Republican's fears. (Yeah.) That's, that's a hard one. That's, that'd be, that's super important for me to hear, but that's, that's really hard to put into practice.

Tony Chvala-Smith 40:30

It's, it's really hard in a polarized environment. Um, the thing is it, it's, the gospel already is political. It always was. Um, now it's different when you try to politicize it. That's a different thing, but, but there's already political dimensions here. And, and Martin Luther King Jr. said several times, uh, Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere and unless that's, unless that's called out, and by injustice here we're not talking about, uh, Carla, Carla shared her candy corn with Charmaine and me and she gave Carla, er, she gave Charmaine four pieces and Tony 3, I feel so unjustly treated. No, we're not talking about injustice like that. We're talking about, uh, socially sponsored abuse, right? Or the, the, the, the refusal to, to honor the dignity of all people. It, it's, it, it's that, that kind of stuff, so.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 41:24

So, I think you're probably already getting a sense for this, and that is that within Community of Christ this is actually a theodicy that is pretty important to us when we talk about peace and justice, especially. And the, this next part, how to pray a liberation theodicy, actually, one of the places you can often see that, if you follow along with the daily prayer for peace, is some of our prayers for peace that are trying to put into words, um, what it is we sense God calling us to as far as changing the world and the systems that are in it. So, here's a few starter lines for praying, uh, liberation theodicy. God, help me to see this culture more clearly, to see how it may have privileged me and caused me to see that my worth is greater than others. And it can go from there. Um, or, God, I am so angry at how easily I am dismissed by others in power simply because, you know, and that, we can personalize it from there, you know, because, because I'm female, because of the color of my skin, um, because I am poor, or I'm uneducated, or because of my appearance, or of my sexual identity, because I have a, a criminal record, uh, because of my name, or my tribe, or my national identity or my immigration status. And so any of those, it's, it's praying to God from our anger and, uh, recognition that things are not just. God, help me not to be afraid to call out the unfairness of the oppressive systems around me. And, yeah, the educational system, the justice system, the healthcare system, the immigration system, um, the religious systems around. So, you can go lots of directions there. Another, just as Jesus ignored the conventions of his time so that he could bring healing and hope. God, help me to not care about the pursed lips or the stares of disapproval that come as I speak out against injustice or march for justice or speak truth to power. Another, Holy Spirit, as a woman in this culture, I pray that you will help me claim my power and wisdom so that girls in the future will be able to distinguish your love and call in their lives from the restrictive approvals of this culture. Another, Jesus, help me not be discouraged in the work for equality when it's, when the problems seem so big or when the change comes so slowly or when the world seems to be getting worse instead of better. Another, last one, Source of love, as I try to learn what your justice looks like, help me learn humility and seek forgiveness for the ways I contribute to it. So, lots of places to, to pray and then act, um, in this theodicy.

Carla Long 45:22

Absolutely. That was, that was beautiful, Charmaine. Thank you for those. That, and what the, when you talk about the pray, the praying part, (. . .) it really, for me, kind of helps cement in my brain and make it concrete, like, what this actually means. Um, so, I really appreciate that part a lot. Thank you so much for doing that.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 45:31

Well, and I'm, like, the last one we did, which was process theodicy, this is one in which we, though we rely on our, on our efforts and God's call for us to act, we also believe that God can help us, can help us changing our hearts, but also help us change those places in the world that, uh, bring, bring suffering. So, I, I think that's a, a part that, that I like about it.

Carla Long 46:03

I like that part, too.

Tony Chvala-Smith 46:04

And we have a book, we have a book to recommend people on this whole theodicy topic that's kind of a fun little book to, to work with.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 46:10

Yeah, it is called, Why is there Suffering. And the subtitle is, Pick Your Own Theological Expedition. So, it's kind of a find your own, um, you know, build your own adventure kind of book where depending on how you respond to a particular issue, it takes you to another place to explore different theodicies that, that might fit well for you. And the author's name is

Tony Chvala-Smith 46:35

Uh, Bethany Sollereder. S O L L E R E D E R. And she has, she contributes to the magazine Christian Century once in a while. And, uh, this is an, an interesting and fun little book.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 46:49

And, and one of the things that I think is really good about it is that, just by the way that it's set up, it implies or probably actually more explicit than that, that we probably don't have just one theodicy, or we don't just need one theodicy. Um, but that we probably at different parts, in different parts of our lives or at different times in our lives, um, rely on different of these theocracies that we've been talking about to help us make sense, um, of what's happening to help us connect to God, to help us know how to pray or how to act, uh, for the sake of others or for our own, in our own suffering. And, so, I think that's a, a really helpful and healthy thing is to say, You know, you don't have to tie yourself to one theology or one theodicy, but that knowing about them gives you a wide variety of, of ways of processing the pieces of life that cause us to need a theodicy like suffering, like injustice, um, like the ideas of evil or of pain. So, anyhow, it's a, it's a good little book if you want to explore it, and I think it would even be, it, you know, some senior highers might even find it accessible and young adults definitely would.

Carla Long 48:16

Well, thank you for that. That's an excellent book recommendation. I'm so glad that you did that. Um, before we jump off this podcast, is there anything else you want to say about liberation theodicy that we didn't touch on yet?

Tony Chvala-Smith 48:28

Well, just that liberation theodicy and liberation theologies, uh, have lots of relevance in Community of Christ life, if we'll let them. Um, it just depends, right? Uh, we, we have to, we have to be willing to, to become probably a more activist kind of church than we're used to being. But, uh, I think there's so much that's so powerful in these very, whether it's, whether it's Latin American liberation theology or, uh, black liberation theology or, uh, Mujerista theology, there's so much we have to learn from these different voices that couldn't, can really inform and empower a church that says it's devoted to the cause of peace and justice in the world.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 49:15

And I think in our ongoing conversations about nonviolence as a church, I think we will find ourselves bumping up against some of the ideas that liberation theologies and theodicies are addressing. Um, and, so, I think it, it may be helpful for us in that conversation.

Tony Chvala-Smith 49:34

And then maybe just, you know, one, we'll call it a final thought about all the theodicies we've covered, but, um, all of us suffer, and will suffer. There, whether grief or loss or, it's going, going to be part of everybody's experience if it hasn't been, surely it has for most listeners to these podcasts, but it's, it is part of our, our experience. And, um, two things just to add is that one would be that suffering is never easy, but it's nearly impossible without a supportive community around you. So, the, the church remains infinitely important for people in the midst of suffering. And then the other thing is that in, in I Corinthians 13, Paul makes this great statement. These, these, these three things abide faith, hope, and love, but the greatest of these is love. I think maybe he might have added, But the hardest of these is hope. Um, and, so, in the times we live in now, hope is really a hard discipline to practice. But sometimes the, the theodicies we, we've, we've worked through can give us little glimpses of what, what practicing hope can look like. They all have little glimpses of, and different angles on what practicing hope can look like. And notice I say practicing hope. Hope's a discipline to practice not just a feeling to have. And, so, uh, and it's a very hard discipline to practice when things are difficult and tough. But anyway, um, reading these theologies and theodicies can, can be a way to, to get little nuggets of hope to, to hold on to as we all struggle on this journey called life. And as we struggle in the, the, the journey of life together as disciples.

Carla Long 51:21

Well, thank you so much, both of you. So, the, this has just been just such a fascinating journey through suffering.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 50:30

They've suffered through this journey.

Carla Long 51:33

I really did just suffer through it. No, no, no, just, just like taking a different look at suffering has just been really fascinating. And just, I, I just really appreciated it. I really appreciate it. Um, how we look at things is, is very important and how we view things is very important. So, I just really, I'm really glad that you have taken the time to talk about this with us.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 51:53

Well, we found it personally helpful. And, so, I think it's one of those things that when we ask, you know, Well, what good is theology? Well, actually, it sometimes makes us not feel alone. And it helps us to know that the things we're thinking or feeling or experiencing, um, that words can fit around them. And that experience with God can be incorporated into them. And, so, I think that's is one of the things theology can do, is give us, um, a framework in which to, to know that our experience and our understanding of God is a shared thing.

Tony Chvala-Smith 52:33

And, Carla, some really good news for you now that we're done is that there's no really difficult Chvala-Smith exam for you to have to take. So, so, we, we've, we've, so you don't have that to suffer.

Carla Long 52:44

I did a lot of suffering in your classes. That's for sure. Um, well, thank you so much, you two.