

Brewed Awakenings | The Cafe | Pursuing Peace

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Peace and Justice, Community of Christ, nonviolent actions, LGBTQ rights, faith journey, peaceful social justice, respectful dialogue.

SPEAKERS

Nicole Sherer, Mary Cusack

Nicole Sherer 00:09

Welcome to The Cafe, part of the Brewed Awakenings series here at Faith Unfiltered Podcast where a diverse panel of voices bring lived experience, thoughtful insight and courageous questions to the table. Here at The Cafe, we explore faith journeys without filters, where doubt is welcomed, stories matter, and no topic is off limits. My name is Nicole Sherer, and I'm the host for today's conversation. I'm joined by Mary Cusack, and today we're going to be talking about pursuing peace in 2026 and what that really means. So, Community of Christ is a peace church, but in a polarized and anxious world it can be hard for me to know where to begin. So, Mary, I guess I'm just curious to hear what you think about when you hear the phrase pursue peace, and kind of how you apply that to your life?

Mary Cusack 01:02

Well, I think pursuing peace may look differently for different people, depending on what their culture is, what their experiences have been, and their age. So I, as I've said, and I can't, I don't want to say it every time we meet, but I came from a very provincial little area in Brooklyn, and I'm 66 years old, so I'm not like, you know, a younger person. And so, I've had, pursuing peace has been a new following for me, something I'm following now. Since I came into Community of Christ about three years ago, it wasn't anything that I actually sat down and thought about consciously. I always treated people, tried to treat people, well and be a decent person and not cause any conflict. Of course, you know, over the years in your life, there's going to be conflict with people here and there. That happened, but it wasn't like an objective I had, really that I actually consciously thought about. I think since coming to Community of Christ, it's challenged me to have a completely different outlook about how I live my life and how I interact with people and even some of my own personal pursuits, like the books I read or the television shows I watch. I've been challenging a lot of that too, because some of those things are definitely not peaceful. Some of those things are, you know, like shows about, you know, somebody getting killed, and if they're going to find out who the killer is, or whatever, I don't know. I really have to think about, what is it I'm using as entertainment, and is it, doesn't seem some of it to be like peace centered. So, so certainly, I think, as you said, Community of Christ is a peace church. And I, personally, I've been in about three years, haven't seen people that really pursue peace and they really mean it the way I've seen in this church, and that's what's caused me to really look for a third way, or a different way to approach things. I don't know if that makes any sense, but...

Nicole Sherer 03:19

Oh, absolutely, I really appreciate that perspective. I think I really resonated with how you kind of mentioned the, you know, everyday actions, as opposed to something that you had initially sat down and really thought about. I think, you know, I'm a 21 year old college student here at Graceland, and so my life moves pretty quickly. I'm always in class. I'm always involved in some kind of extracurricular, and I've noticed that there can be extended periods of time where I'm not really thinking about, you know, my actions, and how I'm incorporating peace into my actions. So, I think in those times it is helpful for me to kind of focused on these smaller moments of incorporating peace in my life, or my friend's life, or being an ally. And I also agree, like you mentioned with Community of Christ, these people that actively pursue peace, I think that's where the blessings of community come in for me, is kind of striving to be more like people I can look up to or inspired, especially at this stage of my life. I feel like my relationships with mentors are so important in my formation as a disciple and just general member of my community. So, I agree it's really helpful to see other people kind of actively pursuing that.

Mary Cusack 04:47

I think Community of Christ provides so many outlets for nurturing and being leaven for somebody's own path to peace. I know recently, Stassi Cramm did a video about embracing Christ's peace. I know that in Mid-Atlantic Mission, they're doing a retreat this weekend. It's a winter retreat, and you could, if you're interested in it, you can go on Mid-Atlantic Mission site with Andrew Bolton on peace and justice, and he's going to base it on the Sermon on the Mount. Um, so if you're stuck in some ways, I think there are, and every, even the everyday, daily prayer is a prayer for peace that you can join in to. For peace in the world, there are all kinds of outlets or suggestions or ideas that I think our church really provides for us to help us pursue that in our lives.

Nicole Sherer 05:50

Yeah, and you know, you saying that reminded me that last spring, I was able to take a class at Graceland with Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith, called Peace and Justice in the Christian Tradition. So, it wasn't focused on Community of Christ, but it was focused on Christianity and theologians of the past who have laid the groundwork for a lot of what we understand about, you know, peace and justice in the world today. So, I think in that class, what I really enjoyed was reading works by Martin Luther King, Julian of Norwich, St Augustine, some of these, you know, groundbreaking individuals. So, I think that's helpful for me. I'm a history major here. So, I love history, and I love kind of thinking about what came before us. So, I remember that class really inspiring me. So, I think education is another thing that's important in my life for feeling like, you know, I'm taking tangible steps towards peace and really pursuing it.

Mary Cusack 06:54

Yeah, I know, growing up like the way I grew up, and I don't want to try and give the wrong impression. But there was a certain level of toughness that was in my neighborhood that I grew up with, and I remember sort of with the outlook that you had to stand up and defend yourself, and even with my parents. My father was in World War Two. My grandfather was in World War One. And I always had this idea that if you really wanted to conquer bad things going on in the world, you had to really stand

up and fight and be willing to even be physical or give your life or whatever. And in my opinion, before I came to our church, I used to think things like, Well, what good does that do getting up and marching around in the street, and does it do anything? But I've come to a whole different way of looking at things now that it's not an either/or... either you get up and you're either neutral or you're passive, or you get up and you join forces against forces, like I've just begun to learn more and more about like non-violent actions and the meaning behind them and how it is exactly what Christ did. Christ always stood up, always did the right thing, always helped people, despite conflicts that it might cause from possibly his leaders. Like healing, for example, healing on the Sabbath, for example, where you know, people were getting infuriated with him for bringing healing on the Sabbath, but he did it anyway. And he didn't, you know, he didn't engage in any kind of violent activity at all, but he still stood up and did what he needed to do. And I think today in particular, in the country as we are living now, I think that's exceedingly important, that we begin to take real social actions and speak out and name things and stand up for things. But yeah, definitely, yeah.

Nicole Sherer 09:15

And, you know, I completely agree like looking around at the political atmosphere and the division that seems at times to be overwhelming to me, especially when I consider my future, the future of like, my friends and their lives, I think, like, how am I going to go on like this? Like, you know, how are things going to get better. And so, I agree that this peaceful protesting and these strategic acts of non-violence are as important as they've ever been. And I think Jesus laid really important groundwork for that. And you know, a source of information, one way that I have seen. This in my life is the past two summers, I've had the privilege of going to work as a summer program director at the Community of Christ campgrounds in Onset, Massachusetts. And I'm from rural Iowa, so I'm not used to more casual discussions about politics, I guess. But when I was there, the people were just casually like, yeah, you know, we're going to go protest for LGBTQ rights this weekend, if you want to join. And I was just so struck by that, like, how they were incorporating that as just kind of an outing that they were going to do together. And it really moved me, and it inspired me. And I think about that a lot when I see protests going on in Minneapolis, I think about, you know, the people who are there, and how they're making that choice on a very personal level, and how it's also translating to a community and national and international level, the impact that they're making. So, I think it's really inspiring to, you know, have an impact on other people's lives, but also feel that sense of satisfaction, and, you know, being part of something bigger than yourself.

Mary Cusack 11:18

Yeah, I agree. I participated in a few peaceful protests, although I've told you, like growing up, I thought, what's the use of those things? But I've done that now a few, quite a number of times, and I do feel a sense of satisfaction. When I haven't gone to them, I have definitely, like, kept up with them. And it amazes me the sheer amount of people that will stand up peacefully and show up and witness to things that are just inequitable and just plain wrong. So, you know, I, another thing I've done too, and I've noticed that I've increased over the years, has been my social media presence and speaking out in areas of social media. I think some of these things can be a little scary. I really do for people, because you don't know if you show up at something, if it will be violent, if it will turn violent even though you're not violent, or people around you aren't, or even if there's some sort of way, like I've talked to people that told me that they were really nervous about even liking things on social media that might not fit with

everybody's politics. Like there were, you know, I think today we can be rightfully concerned about those kind of things, but I think that that's when it, you need it the most. That's when you really need to have the courage to speak out against injustice and to speak out against violence and inequality. That's so great that you participated in that for LGBTQ people, I've done a number of those too for myself. But yeah, so social media, I think, I think that just the whole church, our Enduring Principles are all, practically all of, I mean, we have one specific one about pursuit of peace, but pretty much every one of them is really pursuit of peace, if you really break it down. Um, and I think learning how to not just think that way, like my thinking has really evolved over the years, but it's sort of like reflecting on yourself, like, how do I live that way? I'll give you an example. Today I'm visiting my sister in Florida, and she lives in like a senior citizen area, and we saw this man with a t-shirt and a hat that was really provocative, and it really stirred anger in me. And I think the person I might have been some years ago, I might have made some kind of comment to this guy, but now I pulled back and I, because that's Jesus message, isn't it, not meeting violence with violence, and not meaning if somebody is wearing a provocative shirt or a hat, that's what they want to incite, I'm assuming, and just kind of stepping back and trying to to go inside yourself and maybe even get to, if you're fortunate, like a prayerful place, for that person, in yourself. Have you ever felt provoked by anybody or any kind of situation where you really had to practice that?

Nicole Sherer 14:47

Yes, um, you know, kind of similar to your situation. I think being here, you know, at college, I interact with a lot of different people pretty regularly, and sometimes I'm shocked when people who I'm friends with or have a lot of classes with or communicate with a lot have beliefs that completely contradict my own beliefs and beliefs that I would not have expected based off of my interactions with them. And sometimes I almost feel betrayed when I find that out, I'm so shocked and so, like, disappointed that this relationship, we didn't have as much in common as I thought we did. And so, I think that's a moment where I'm pretty, you know, drawn to start a conflict. And I think in those situations, I've definitely had to pull back and just kind of consider, how can I go about this in a more diplomatic way? One thing that's been helpful to me is to kind of say, like, oh, you know, I wasn't familiar that you thought that way. Like, can you tell me a little bit about where you're coming from or what's led you to believe this? And most of the time, we're able to have a really civil, productive conversation. So, I think that's been really helpful to me. But one thing that I'm curious to hear your perspective on, because it's something that I do struggle with in those situations, is balancing my inner calm with the social conditions, like when I see how, you know, horrific conditions are in the country or across the world, it can be hard for me to kind of protect my own mental health. I kind of fall down a rabbit hole and get really wrapped up in the the darkness. So, I'm curious to see if you have any advice or any experience with kind of balancing your own peace with more global peace.

Mary Cusack 16:47

I would have to tell you, just looking at my life that the way I've been able to address it has been like through the work I've done over the years, I worked in a group home with kids that had really serious, serious family problems and poverty, and came from really tough neighborhoods in Manhattan and Brooklyn and I guess the Bronx too. And then I worked as a school psychologist in a lot of different schools, and I worked directly with kids that came from, like, impoverished backgrounds, and the way that I've been able to try and feel like I'm making any kind of a dent has been just, you know, you can't

reach out to everybody, and you can't solve the whole entire situation for everybody, but I feel like when I can reach out to that one person or that one family and help to make things better for them, or help them to find resources that will help, you, know, to lighten their burdens, that has always made me feel like there was something I could like do, that was, you could hold on to that. All right, I can't solve all the kids in Brooklyn's problems, but I can work with these kids that I know in Brooklyn that are having a horrible experience, and I can maybe help to lighten the load a little bit for them. So, that's kind of what I've always done. I've always like worked with, years ago, I was in the Catholic Church, and there was a nun named St Mary Euphrasia who started a religious community, and she used to say, "one person is of more value than the world." And that has always stuck with me, that if I can reach that one person, you know, it's very it's really powerful. And the one person increases, you know, over time, or they reach out to other people. So, that's kind of the way I've tried to, I've tried to bring it more personally within my own realm of, how can I reach out to people that are suffering? So I don't know if that's helpful, but...

Nicole Sherer 19:13

No, it definitely was. Thank you for that. And I really like that phrase, that one person is more... I can't remember what exactly what it was. Would you restate that?

Mary Cusack 19:23

One person is of more value than the world?

Nicole Sherer 19:26

Yeah, that's really powerful. Because I think I have this tendency to kind of overlook how significant and how powerful it is to even just change one person's life. And I think that kind of ties into our blessings of community. You know, when everyone in the community is willing to be part in transforming someone else's life, that can have really profound consequences. So, I really like that take on it, and that's definitely something that I'm trying to work on a little bit more is implementing peace and contributing in a more tangible way. I think sometimes, especially as I've mentioned, when I'm in school, it's hard for me to see practical steps of what I can do. So I think that's something that I'm focusing on. One of the ways that I find is the easiest to incorporate in my life is being really intentional about, you know, where I'm spending my money, where I'm spending my time and energy, and kind of investing in the programs and people that are supporting peace. So, I don't know if that's something that you're very conscious of as well. I know you mentioned earlier the TV shows. Sometimes you're watching them and you're like, This isn't peaceful at all. That's something I've tried to think about a little bit more, is kind of the implications of the things that I'm constantly, routinely engaging with.

Mary Cusack 21:03

Well, I do think it has an effect on your own inner vibrations, like what types of things you invest in, whether they're books or movies or TV shows or whatever. I think they change, they change you vibrationally. But I like what you're saying about, I have to be honest. I don't, transparency, I can't say that I'm really aware of a lot of things about investing my money in this or that. I am, because I'm LGBTQ, I'm aware of that. So those, you know, when I know that a corporation's leader is supporting things that are anti-LGBTQ. I definitely will not support those things. I will never go to Chick fil A, and you know some, but I, you know, the truth is, I don't know enough about what's out there. And I think

that is part of, I think pursuing peace, maybe the first part of it is just raising your awareness and your consciousness about it. And then maybe the next thing is, well, I really don't know enough about what's out there and what corporations support what or do what in the world, and really finding out, like, really, like, how do you, I'm curious to know, because you're teaching me. How do you find out? Like, what's out there and supports what, whether there it's you know, you agree with that or not.

Nicole Sherer 22:35

So, I am kind of on a similar stage with you, where I kind of don't know until I know, and maybe I'm with a friend, and they're like, Oh, you want to eat there. Like, you know that they donated however much money to anti-LGBTQ programs? And I'm like, really, I didn't know that. So, I completely agree. I think education is really important, and at the same time, we don't always have time to sit around and research every single place we go and do and what they're supporting and what they don't but I think for me, social media, can't trust everything you see on social media, but it is how a lot of youth get their information, and sometimes there's a lot of value in the things that go on. I follow several pages that are focused on social justice, and they have a lot of helpful information for me. Sometimes there's even organizations that post lists of, okay, these are 200 companies that donated to such and such campaign that I don't agree with, and that's really helpful for me, and part of it is on my own personal level, feeling like I'm consciously not supporting those things and instead supporting the things that I believe in. So, I think just constant education and kind of this theory of lifelong learning for me, never being afraid to admit that I was wrong or that I was ignorant about something, because I'm wrong and ignorant every single day. It's just something that I have to constantly be reassessing. So, that's the stage of life I'm at where I'm kind of just getting started on my journey. So, it'd be kind of silly to get stuck on one railroad track right now, but I think, you know, it's important to also think about where we're putting our energy. And a way that I kind of focus on that is on campus, I try to focus on things that I feel really fulfilled in and a lot of those things happen to be things like Afterglow, which is technically non-denominational, but it supports the values of Community of Christ, and it's a weekly gathering we do where there's singers and there's testimonies and everyone of different faith is welcome to come celebrate Jesus together. So, I sing in that a lot, and that really makes me feel fulfilled and part of a community, and it's a helpful way to, for me to give back. And Mike Hoffman, the campus minister here at Graceland, recently started a Bible study that's focused on real world issues. So, last Wednesday, for example, we talked about LGBTQIA and the Bible, and we looked at some verses that are really affirming of those things. And it was really helpful to me to kind of ground those things in Scripture when I don't necessarily always open my Bible as much as I probably should, but I still believe these things, so it's helpful to set aside time to really focus on that, and that's something I found really helpful.

Mary Cusack 25:54

Oh, I think that's wonderful. I know for me because I grew up as an LGBTQIA+ Christian, and that my Christianity as a queer person, is so important to me. And I just feel like, whether there's just one or a million people out there, I want to reach out to them, tell them they're beloved of God and so, and then to, I think respectful dialog with people that don't understand it, or, I mean, that's kind of where I'm feeling my call right at this point in my life is to, I go to, I go to Pride festivals, and I bring a little tent with the Community of Christ stuff. I bring pamphlets like with the Enduring Principles and things, and I engage with people that are queer, that are interested in our church, and let them know, you know,

what we're about. But I also feel called to be able to dialog with people, especially in our church, that may not understand what that's all about, or really, really, or they may have, like preconceptions about what it is. And, you know, to tell my story, because that's what I've realized, is when I first came out, like nobody I knew was gay, like a couple of people my age were, but we were all coming out to our parents, and it was like a big deal. I mean, these are people from, like, the great, you know, generation, World War Two people. And what happened eventually was, Oh, wow. Mary is gay, and she's just like, I am, you know, we've been friends, and she has a lot of the same likes and dislikes and feelings, and she's gay, and so that's how I feel called to people that probably are not in our community, that really don't understand that I feel a call to try and reach out and have like, respectful dialog without like, what you were, the example you were giving before, when you when you were talking to, you know, to other people that had different opinions than you. So, I know I'm, I do a lot of that. And my sister-in-law, who lives in Brooklyn, was saying that there was a lot of stuff going on there now with with Border Patrol people coming in looking for people that are undocumented. And she said that she and other people were keeping in touch so they could tell each other where they were and what neighborhoods they were, and people were going there to kind of stand by these people and for these people, and sort of doing the stuff with the whistles to sort of, you know, alert people about that kind of stuff. So, I think there's things out there that you can do that. Like, I didn't know that was going on over there, but there are things and that may not be somebody's call to do that, okay, but there are things out there that, I agree with you, I need to find resources that can tell me or suggest to me things that can fit into my life, that I can carve out time to do. Because I think it really is important to not just espouse stuff, but to actually take actions.

Nicole Sherer 29:21

Yeah, and thank you for everything you shared. I think that's incredible all the work you've done. I'm really moved by it, because representation is so important for people to feel like they belong and are just in their lives. So, I really appreciate that. And I think something that I'm, you know, it's unfortunate, but I'm interested in is religious trauma, especially related to LGBTQIA communities, and how that can really impact their self image, and vice versa, their image of Christianity. So, I think it's really cool that you've been kind of spreading awareness that they do belong, and there is a church that will love them and accept them unconditionally. And I think that is really important, because that kind of representation, and, you know, the people have come out before, the current generation has laid all of the groundwork that's made it more socially acceptable, but there's also still a lot of work to do, so I'm really appreciative of all of the work you've done.

Mary Cusack 30:30

Well, there's a lot of voices in our church too, like in the Mid-Atlantic Mission Center, which I'm part of, they, it's been suggested and I want to do it, is to do like a Zoom. I'd like to do like a monthly zoom on different topics, to do with queer Christianity and definitely church trauma is like, right up there with it, and asking people to tell their stories and just, you know, having Question and Answer opportunities. So that's something else like I'll be pursuing down the line.

Nicole Sherer 31:08

I think that sounds amazing. And I think I speak for everyone when I say I look forward to that, and it comes across my channel of information, because I think that sounds great.

Mary Cusack 31:21

Well, what you were saying that you do at school, that you sing with, is that something that's just like an in-person thing, or is that something that anybody can join like via social media or zoom or something?

Nicole Sherer 31:35

Yeah, so it's in-person mostly, but they do have a live stream on Facebook. [Oh, great.] I think the Facebook group is called, I think it's just called Afterglow GU or something along those lines. But it's really cool, because my parents can watch me sing, and I know a lot of Graceland alumni who miss Afterglow will join in and watch because this year we just have a guitar player, but last year we had two guitar players, percussionist, a piano player. So, we really get a good vibe going and a good atmosphere. And I would say, really, no topic is off limits. Everyone has the opportunity to speak. Usually, there's three speakers every week. I think one of the things that's really cool about Afterglow is that the students are the ones giving the testimonies. And as you know, everyone has a different, unique story to share. And I've learned so much from hearing from my peers and hearing, you know, their practical experiences in their lives with their faith. So, I think that's been a really cool experience for me, because it's a little different than a traditional church where there's maybe someone giving a sermon. It's a little bit more informal. And there's certainly a time and place for both models. But I think the Afterglow model has been helpful for me to, you know, experience and see Christianity on a more personal level with my peers and how it's impacted their lives. But I think there's a lot of good things going on in the world, and I think it's important to recognize those things. And like you said, you know, somehow try to educate yourself on how you can get involved with things that are always already going on. And I think that's really helpful for seeing a path forward and balancing your inner peace will still pursuing peace for everyone else. It's one thing that Community of Christ is very intentional about, is sharing responsibility for all world conditions, not just focusing on our own personal experiences. And I think that's really special.

Mary Cusack 33:58

Well, I'm really glad that you shared about Afterglow and that you can find it on Facebook, because I, for I am, definitely going to pursue clicking in and seeing, seeing the stories and seeing the kinds of services you do, and I'm sure, I'm sure it's going to be edifying. So thank you for sharing about that.

Nicole Sherer 34:25

Yeah, I think that's a really cool thing about social media, is it certainly has its pros and cons, but the access to information and the ability to connect with people that you normally wouldn't get to connect with is really special.

Mary Cusack 34:43

I also like, I like that you brought up about education as well, in my process of becoming more open towards a non-violent, peaceful outlook in my life and with other people, I've just found, recently, found a book called, Jesus and Non Violence, and it's by a guy named Walter Wink, W, I N, K, and I just want to throw that out there, in case anybody's interested, because I think that's been, you know, it kind of illustrates ways that Jesus responded to the situations when he was in, like not responding to violence with violence and not and some of this is not that easy. I mean, I think some of the things Christ talked

about in terms of love your enemy or pray for those who persecute you. I think those things are really hard to implement, but my guess is that once you begin on the path and you start to develop, then it becomes internalized, and it becomes who you are. And I certainly am hoping that you know along the path, for me that's going to develop, because I really want that very much.

Nicole Sherer 36:00

Yeah, and I think, you know, it helps me to kind of consider peace and the pursuit of peace, almost as a skill that I can work on and, you know, get better at. I think that's kind of a growth mindset, which is something that's helpful for me in not getting stagnant and continuing to be proactive and moving forward. So, you know, I really kind of resonate with what you shared there. I think we've raised a lot of conversations we could do a whole episode about So, yeah, we'll have to talk more about those in the definitely. Is there anything else that you wanted to discuss about this topic.

Mary Cusack 36:43

No. I mean, I feel like this was pretty good for the first time.

Nicole Sherer 36:47

Yeah, yeah. I agree. It's helpful to have a little bit of a of a broader topic before you get into the nitty gritty.

Mary Cusack 36:56

Yeah, and I love that we're kind of different, you know, we come from different places and with different ages, and I really appreciated listening to what you had to teach me and what you had to share with me about what you've discovered and practiced in your life. So, it was great.

Nicole Sherer 37:13

The same goes to you. I really have appreciated your experiences, and I look forward to talking about you again, in the talking with you again in the future, because I think I can already tell I've learned a lot from you, so I'm excited to see what else I can learn. In closing, I think the highlights are that peace is a continuous journey, but there are ways where you can practice inner peace and social peace simultaneously, and it can be difficult to balance, but I think it's important to rely on the community around you and learn from each other. What would you say?

Mary Cusack 37:50

I agree with that 100%. I feel like those were the things that we we touched on at different points in our discussion. And I would just add that I think Community of Christ is an enormous resource. There is just so much there. You can go on the app. You can go to the prayer every day. You can go to your mission center. There's just so much that's offered, not just about peace and justice, but like so much to nurture your your spirit and your soul.

Nicole Sherer 38:18

Thank you for that. You've been listening to The Cafe part of the Brewed Awakening series at Faith Unfiltered Podcast. I'm Nicole Sherer here with Mary Cusack, and we want to thank you for taking time out of your day to spend with us.