

ENGAGING

the faith community

This conversation between Katie, Zac, and Joan helped me find ways of speaking about some ideas of God and the environment that weren't really new to me but which I was struggling to articulate. For example, the concept that our living and non-living world is sacred, not in a way that displaces God, but because it is an aspect of God. Also, the concept of cherishing creation is so far removed from viewing it as an asset to be managed and priced.

I also found it encouraging to focus on the process of trying to tread more lightly on the earth through choosing actions, evaluating, and trying again. Our earth stewardship sometimes seems to be framed as a score card of pass or fail; of course, we will always fail because there are always things we could do better. Taking small steps in the right direction with a commitment to learning as we go will definitely get us much further than such a judgmental score card approach.

There are so many hopeful pointers in this conversation, it has convinced me to follow up and find the series so I can see what else they have to say. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did.

Linda Hazell, Aug 2021

These excerpts were taken from the Project Zion podcast transcript (<http://www.projectzionpodcast.org/362-climate-brewing-engaging-the-faith-community/>) a podcast by the Community of Christ Latter Day Seekers Team.

[Joan Thompson, from Kitchner, Ontario Canada] Welcome to Project Zion Podcast. This is the series climate brewing, where we interview the world class experts Katie and Zac Harmon McLaughlin.... Katie serves the Community of Christ in spiritual formation ministries and created a [podcast] series last spring on awakening to God's presence. Zac is the director of the Graceland seminary, and also a previous contributor to [this] podcast. It's such a pleasure to have the opportunity to explore with both of you how individuals and communities can become better engaged and work... towards climate justice ...So today, we want to explore an alternative approach that's especially suited to faith communities. But first, there's a statement that I've heard multiple times, that the climate crisis is actually a spiritual issue. Can you tell us more about this?

[Katie Harmon-McLaughlin]

Yes, thank you, Joan...You know, the first response that I have is that everything in our lives is a spiritual issue. But in particular, when we think about the climate and justice for God's creation, we have to remember that we too, are part of that creation. We too, are part of the creation that God is creating and names good and beloved. And so recognizing our proper place within that interdependent web of life is part of our own humanity's spirituality theology. But also one of the stories that I shared for my own life during this presentation came from a time when I was in college, and I was you know, really learning about ecological theology and eco feminist spiritualities and feeling very passionate about climate justice and care for creation. And I was in the Student Center at Graceland University, holding a class plastic bottle. And I had a simple choice to make. There was right beside me a trash can. And across the student center was the recycle bin. And I was late to class. And there was a huge crowd of people coming through the doors, which would mean that I would be fighting against the crowd to get to the recycle bin. And in that moment, I had to make a choice of if I was going to choose the convenient, easy, quick option and get to my class on time. Or, if I would choose the option that aligned more completely with what I was learning and discovering, and how I was being formed about God's care and love of this whole beautiful creation and my part in preserving honoring it and helping it to flourish. And so that moment, became a theological decision, it became a spiritual practice, it became a moment of profound spiritual awareness where I took this

plastic bottle, and said to myself, I'm going to live my faith with integrity, even in this one small act. And so I walked through the crowd of people, I'm making this sound much more dramatic than it probably needs to be. But I walked through the crowd of people. And I ceremoniously held my plastic bottle over the recycle bin. And I dropped it in. And I just felt this sense of peace that comes from the alignment of our lives and hearts and actions with God's larger vision in the world and for the world. And so for me, that is just one example of how the daily choices that we make have profound spiritual and theological implications, even when we aren't conscious of those. But when we become conscious of those, we can contribute our actions meaningfully with God's preferred future in and for the world around us. And this topic of climate change certainly is a part of that invitation for spiritual and theological alignment and meaning in our lives.

[Zac Harmon-McLaughlin]

... I guess the only thing I might say...is, anytime we come across crisis or suffering, I think it's a helpful thing for us as disciples to locate God in it. Where is God in it? And what that immediately does is help us deconstruct a perspective that God is somehow separate from it. Somehow on the outside looking in, when in reality, God is fully present and existent... within the climate crisis. ...Now, I'm not saying God is creation, but I'm saying God is within and amongst creation. And that's a powerful paradigm shift to understand. God is not separate from the suffering of the world. And God is not separate from the climate crisis because this is and is part of God.

[Katie] ...this is kind of a summation of ecological theology ..from one of the most renowned ecological theologians Sally McFague. 'The world is the body of God', which is a profound statement that reflects our theological belief in incarnation. And so when we understand creation, to be the body of God, then that profoundly impacts the way that we understand our actions toward that creation.

[Joan] Wow, that kind of changes everything doesn't it? It shifts everything....Do you have any suggestions or ideas for how our listeners can start to really become cherishers of creation?...

[Zac] ...Katie and I once did a ... climate justice retreat for a congregation. And we did it with our great friend, mentor, Minister, extraordinary Dave Heinze. And one of the exercises we did with the congregation that weekend has always stuck with me. And I find it a great way to begin to notice, again, getting back to our first response to notice our connection and our belonging to creation and really trying to start a different narrative of the us-them we have with creation, right?...really starting the narrative of belonging, and connectedness. So ...we asked the congregation to look at their sacred space, we were sitting in the.... congregational building, ...to notice the elements around them. The brick that made the walls,

where did that brick come from? What earth did it emerge from? Who mined it and... dug it out of the ground, molded it and then burned it to, you know, make it brick? And the building had these huge wooden beams creating a massive, vaulted ceiling? Where did those beams come from? And what trees created those beams? And how did they get here, right, and you get the point, we literally just ask them to look around the room, they sat in, the room, they called beloved and sacred... We need resources and creation to thrive and survive. And this is a mutual partnership of life. And it was a real moment for me to really, again, begin that process of connection and understanding my belonging to nature, not my Dominion of it, but my belonging to it. So I've always found that to be a helpful exercise to simply ... just start to notice the things that make up our life, where they come from, and what makes them so.

[Katie] ...One of the things that instantly comes up for me is Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel talks about the importance of living life and radical amazement at, as the heart of the spiritual life, and when we are able to look around us, as Zac mentioned, just the everyday materials that make up our, our life and the things that we're able to do and where they come from, but even our own breath in being, and the foods that are on our table, and start to just awaken to and cherish our intrinsic connections with the planet, because they literally daily sustain us. I think that can give us a whole new level of appreciation, for creation, care and its importance, not as some abstract objects separate from us. But as an interdependent living organism integrally connected to us, that daily gives us the opportunity to breathe and eat and live, and move and have our being as the scripture reminds us. And so practices of gratitude, of holy attention, ...of noticing the birds and the trees and the seasons changing, and all of the ways that the patterns of creation, impact the patterns and cycles of our own lives, can be a wonderful way of deepening our sense of meaning and love and growing in our ability to cherish the natural world around us because we realize that it is part of us. And then, you know, on top of that, ... Wendy Farley, in her new book, *Beguiled By Beauty*, talks about falling in love with the beauty of the world, and how as we awaken to the beauty and the integrity of beings, a recognition that everything was created, not for me, as a consumer or spectator, but that it has its own life and purpose and being. I mean, when we really just dwell in that awareness, it is amazing and awe-inspiring and humbling. And dwelling in the beauty and integrity of other beings, whether human or non-human, naturally deepens our compassion and our urgency to care for the people in the planet that we love. And contributes to that sense of cherishing that can help us move to action.

[Joan] Great ideas.... For individuals and communities, who may be feeling overwhelmed about where to ... start, and what they might ...do to make even a small contribution to such a huge issue. What is it about the model [The Pastoral Spiral]... that can cut through the [feeling of being] overwhelm[ed] and confusion for us?

[Zac] ... I could talk about the Pastoral Spiral for a long time. The Pastoral Spiral does a couple things that are really profoundly important for us in times [when we are feeling].. overwhelm[ed]. One, it gives us focus, it reminds us that... you don't have to solve the whole problem.... But you can act within your context to make significant and profound change. And so that's really what the pastoral spiral does... it gives us an opportunity to become social change makers. In our context, rarely will [it] be the case that I, as a disciple, have some transformative impact on complex geopolitical issues in the world. But I can impact my house, my household, my congregation, my neighbourhood, the places ...[that] are... part of my context. And so the pastoral spiral helps us create focus.

The other, perhaps more important thing it does, ...[is] help us clarify our intention[s]. ...[It helps us] challenge our norms, our biases and our assumptions. So we no longer approach a certain problem or issue solely from our own ...[perspective]... we invite other voices into the conversation, other perspectives, other data points that reshape and reframe the very way ... we think. This is important, because when those things happen, we muster the courage to walk against the stream of culture across the room to a recycle bin, and put a plastic bottle away, because we're rethinking the way we understand ourselves in the world.

The pastoral spiral has four main parts. You start with experience or encounter, you move into social analysis, which is understanding the broader context of your experience. That moves you into faith reflection, spiritual reflection, theological reflection, [and] discernment of that context and experience that moves you ultimately toward new questions, new actions, ...[followed by] new experiences, encounters, ...[and then to].. to other analyses. So that's the third,... major, important part of the pastoral spiral. ...[That is] we largely live in a world that is very linear. And most of the models and formulas we encounter are A plus B equals C. And so [people think] if you just do this, ... you will have resolved and solved the problem of climate in your context. That's not the case. This is a cycle...[and cycles] don't take us linearly, they take us down into the depths, ...farther and farther, deeper and deeper. I like to call these kinds of things 'Luke 5 methods'. In Luke 5 is the scripture where Jesus gets on the boat, tells them to stop casting in the shallows [and] go into the deep water. They're hesitant; [but] they do [it and] they catch an abundance of fish. So

PASTORAL SPIRAL



this is a Luke 5 method, we've been trying it our own way for a long time and Jesus is on the boat, disrupting us saying, "Hey, you're not quite getting it, try going deeper!". And we're [thinking], "...but Jesus... we can figure this out without you". It's time for us to let go of that hesitancy and try going deeper... The Pastoral Spiral presents a multitude of opportunities to do just that, to not just assume that there is a quick fix (sometimes I like to call them Amazon fixes, overnight, you know), we'll solve the problem, and then it's done. This [method] is a cycle, a process of ..discovering small, focused, actionable items ...[for] your context and climate justice but also, as you move into those actions, ...having new questions emerge; encounters with new perspective[s] or paradigm[s] found through the process that ultimately lead you into a new process. Over time, that impact, that social change expands and we find ...a whole host of relationships that make a more robust, comprehensive approach to climate justice.

The last thing I'll share is just a quick quote from Maria Cimperman. I think it highlights...our earlier conversation about connection and belonging to this, ...making climate a priority or something we cherish. So she says (page 175 in her book), "while we say we want these difficult problems and situations resolved, we usually mean that we want to have the problem solved without any significant changes on our part, or in our way of life."

[Katie] I'll just add on... that ...the pastoral spiral is ... a really wonderful integration of social change and systems thinking with classic Christian discernment methodology. ..It ...becomes this great way for contemplation to meet action for the benefit and the healing of the world. The faith reflection and social analysis pieces are taken equally seriously and they affect and inform one another. Also, this is a method that is very accessible; the way we talked about it might sound somewhat complex but if you are a person or a community entering this process, I think that you'll find that it has a very natural flow. It's very accessible [for] any issue that you are desiring to go deeper in, especially climate change and it's relevant for many contexts. This... method... was developed... by the Jesuits in the 80s. It has been used around the world in some contexts of extreme poverty, as a way for communities to ... to find empowerment in their own ability ... to discover what is needed in a situation, and to respond in transformative and sustainable ways. This is really a process that has been used globally in many different kinds of contexts and socio economic circumstances, and has time and time again, been transformative for the lives of individuals and communities. I think it is [a tool that is] really relevant and important for us as we look at [reducing] climate change in our own unique contexts.

[Zac] ... Katie said something ...[that] is really important, and connects us to our very first question. [It is] so important for ... all of us to understand that this is a spiritual theological issue. ...The pastoral spiral ...connects us to an interdisciplinary approach.... remember... you don't have to be a scientist to care about climate justice... or to be knowledgeable about it. You don't ...have to be a sociologist, or a theologian, or an educator or a healthcare professional,... the pastoral spiral takes an interdisciplinary approach at discovering the incredible interconnections and intersections of any given justice issue, to help us seek a holistic approach to [take] action [against] injustice... [and this] is ... an important part of its method and process.

[Joan] Okay, that all sounds wonderful and I'm really getting a sense of how important this kind of an approach is, especially for an issue that we're in for the long haul. [However,] I want to go back for a minute to the [feeling] overwhelm[ed] and tell you ..about ...my congregation. We started two years ago, ...learning [in] our adult discussion class [for about 6 months] about climate change and all of the issues. We did it through a video and discussion approach where we watched a whole bunch of different videos and talked about them. ...The intent was that ...we would then move into action. Well, we didn't do that, because [I] decided to start seminary and got totally sidetracked by reading and studying ...and also being involved in the North American Climate Justice Team. So long story short, it's two years later now, [and] I haven't done anything except show up for a few protest marches. And in preparing for this podcast, I went back and listened again to your podcast number 296 (plug in there for the listeners!) and it just sounded really incredibly helpful. You talked about how [the] Mother Teresa approach (doing small things with great love) was a great way for people to get started. And so I thought, okay, I can do one small thing with great love, I can send it an email to the congregation to see if anyone's interested in exploring climate action teams. No commitment here, just 'Who's interested in talking about it for an hour a week?'...eight of us are now meeting on a weekly basis. All along, I've thought, Oh, I should contact this person and find out some information and this person and that person and the community, government and interfaith, and it just seemed overwhelming. [However,] now that we've got eight of us, each person has agreed to do one thing...to take us to the next step. So, is this what you're talking about, in terms of the way for congregations and other groups to slowly, easily and naturally move into the process?

[Zac] Yes, Amen! 100 times over. I do love Mother Teresa's approach of small things with great love; she changed the world with that approach. One important

thing to remember about Mother Teresa was that she focused on her context. She wasn't looking at the global world issue of children or child orphans or childhood poverty, she was focused on her context, on Calcutta, which is pretty powerful and profound. Another thing though in my context in the United States, something that has been highlighted by the last year's narrative of racial justice and the cultural shift ...that's been happening in the United States, has been an echoing flag of progress, not perfection. I fall under that category where I don't want people to see rough drafts of my stuff. I want to make sure it's fully ready to go and solid and I've read it 10 times and blah, blah, blah. What I'm starting to learn about issues of justice (climate is an issue of justice) is that we don't have time for perfection. We have to stumble our way through it. Now that's not meant to be flippant and say don't take care or intention in what we do but that we can no longer hesitate [to try for] for 50,000 foot moonshots; we've got to look at this more as a Mount Everest situation. You know how you get to the top of Mount Everest, you put one foot in front of the other, and you take a step, and then a step, and then a step and it's a long walk. That's how you get to the top of Mount Everest. If we really want to move on issues of justice, we do exactly what you are doing in your congregation and it's baby steps. Baby steps with a big idea, but baby steps nonetheless, that ultimately lead us towards ...social transformation. As a community of Christ, as disciples, as Christians in the world, we need to stop hesitating [and waiting] for perfection, and begin moving toward the progress of the good news of Jesus Christ, which is justice.

[Katie] ...this is a method rooted in our faith, it also helps us to cultivate the very deep resources of people of faith. ...[We] are facing urgent and overwhelming issues ...[and it is essential] that we are rooted not in our own immediacy or agenda, but our action is rooted and grounded in God, the source of life, the source of creation, source of love, source of perennial hope, that sustains us and gives us courage and integrity and faith, even in the midst of seemingly insurmountable odds. So that's one really valuable resource that people of faith can bring to these perplexing issues that affect us as a global humanity; ...activism without Spirit can quickly run dry, drain us out, and empty us out of our energy and motivation. When we find our lives consistently tapping into that deeper source that motivates our actions, we can find the energy, courage and faith we need to engage over the long haul, even if we don't see the immediate success we would desire.

[Zac] ...we're actually prophetically participat[ing] with God [in] God's liberat[ing] work of justice. ... our job as disciples is to believe that God is in the work with us, that God is doing the leading, God is doing the inviting. God is doing the healing, and that we are participants in that. That is hard, that makes us have to be, not just believers, but faithful believers. ...

[Joan] ...Is there one practice or action or idea that you most want people to take away from this, to help them get started? If they haven't already got started in climate action?

[Zac] ... An important takeaway from this conversation for me, is [feeling] overwhelm[ed]. Friends, you do not have to solve the climate crisis on your own. In fact, it's not yours to solve on your own but you can make a profound impact in just your family, or just your faith community, or just your neighbourhood and there are dozens of ways to do that. Even just making the shift from Styrofoam containers during a coffee hour or paper plates at a family dinner to regular dishes or compostable dishes. I mean, there, there are a whole host of small ways to begin that process... every day... So a takeaway from this would be just that, focus on your context, focus on the things that you can do, whether it's bringing a group of eight people together, and asking the questions collectively, or whether it is choosing to walk across the room and put a plastic bottle in a recycle bin. That is a profound victory of proclaiming God fully present in creation.

[Katie] ... I would love if every listener went out and bought a copy of Maria Cimperman's book, Social Analysis For The 21st Century, and use that as a study in your congregation or in your own personal life.

...I can make choices that can contribute to the flourishing and well-being of God's beloved, beautiful broken creation, and to know that I'm part of that creation. I want people to hear that there's joy in this effort and there's hope in this effort, even though the problems are tragic and overwhelming. The invitation is joyful resistance for the sake of God's peaceable So my prayer and hope is that others might awaken to that joyful invitation to participate with God in bringing about a better world for everyone.

[Joan] Wow, well, all I can say to that is 'Amen!'...

If you've resonated with this article, don't forget to go to the recording of the full podcast at <http://www.projectzionpodcast.org/362-climate-brewing-engaging-the-faith-community/> or check out some of the things that they are doing at Graceland Seminary www.graceland.edu/seminary