

Coffee Buzz | Stassi Cramm | Talk It Out

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Jesus Christ, division, music, difficult topics, principles, community, conversations, faithful disagreement, God, peace, six lenses of discerning God's will

SPEAKERS

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Blake Smith 00:28

Hello and welcome to Project Zion Podcast. This is your host, Blake Smith. In this special episode from Project Zion, we will be cross-posting a Witness the Word sermon offered by President Designate Stassi Cramm. In this time of division and unrest, not only in the United States but across the world stage, it is very important for us to hear this message again and again. Here is President Designate Stassi Cramm with the message, "Talk it Out."

Stassi Cramm 01:02

Recently, I was watching a documentary by Garth Brooks about his life and career. He is a country music singer and songwriter from the USA. According to Businessinsider.com Garth is second only to the Beatles in number of album sales. In the video, Garth shared about two different experiences where one of his songs generated difficult conversations among his listeners. In 1991, he released a song titled, "The Thunder Rolls," that told the story of domestic violence and murder. When the music video was released, it was considered too controversial. According to ew.com its themes of wife beating, child abuse and murder quickly made it the most controversial clip in country music history. The Nashville network banned the video because it was considered too violent, as did Country Music Television. Radio stations and other people, including advocates against domestic violence, petitioned to get the video shared. The petition said the video would draw attention to the important and often not discussed issue of domestic violence. Their hope was this attention would then create opportunities for conversations about what needed to be changed. In the end, the video was released, and the song climbed to the top of the country charts. A year later, Garth released a song titled, "We Shall Be Free." According to Rolling Stone, the song and its accompanying video, which addressed hunger, homelessness, religious freedom, and environmental issues, also tackled the hot button topic of racism, with Brooks noting that the Los Angeles riots in April 1992 had first inspired the song's creation. During the 1993 Super Bowl, Garth had negotiated with the network to play the "We Shall Be Free" video, and then he would sing the national anthem. Shortly before game time, the network executives changed their minds. They considered the video too controversial to play, and Garth left the stadium in protest about their decision. Minutes before the broadcast was to begin, the network agreed to honor the contract and play the video. These stories represent three principles for me that I'd like to build on. First, they remind us of something that we already know through our own experience, and that is, we often sing our way into new ways of understanding. The First Presidency noted this idea in the forward

of the Community of Christ Dutch hymnal that was released in 2022. Andrew Fletcher, a Scottish author and politician, was credited with saying, "Let me write the songs of a nation. I don't care who writes its laws." A people's identity and beliefs are shaped by the songs they sing. These songs are written on their hearts and branded into their collective memory. This is certainly true for Community of Christ. In this regard, I am grateful to songwriters and performing artists who are able and willing to take life's most difficult topics and write music about their beliefs of how the world should be. It stimulates important conversations for the rest of us. The second principle I see in these stories is the positive influence of non-violent action. In both instances, one group of people with decision authority wanted to stop a video release, while another group of people felt strongly that the release should occur. Through petitions in the first story and a walkout in the second story, change occurred. The third principle is how it seems to be human nature to avoid difficult conversations. The decision makers did not want to release videos that touched on sensitive topics, even if the topics were important to discuss. I remember as a kid growing up hearing the adage from my culture to never discuss politics, money or religion in polite company. The point was clear. You wanted to avoid topics that might generate tense conversations. Well, I think it's obvious that we cannot avoid conversations about religion as a faith community. Regarding money, our Community of Christ experience has taught us this is also an unavoidable and important topic. Jesus talked about money and material resources a lot. He knew that people could be easily distracted and misdirected by the power of wealth if they did not keep their heart focused on God's vision of shalom for the world. Simply stated is Jesus's admonition as recorded in Matthew chapter six, verse 21 for where your treasure is there, your heart will be also. So, that leaves politics. And it turns out that it is also impossible to avoid conversations about politics in our faith community. That is not to say that we need to have conversations about partisan preferences. It means that we need to have conversations about the worth of all persons, economic justice, earth stewardship, finding unity in diversity, to just name a few. All these topics have some connection to politics in how we make decisions and engage in changing unjust practices in our own context and communities. After all, as disciples, we follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who was crucified by the political powers of his day because of the conversations for change he proclaimed. Perhaps the invitation before us to courageously engage in important, although sometimes difficult conversations that can make the world a better place is best captured in Doctrine and Covenants. 163, paragraph three. This is a long paragraph, but listen carefully to the message. "You are called to create pathways in the world for peace in Christ to be relationally and culturally incarnate. The hope of Zion is realized when the vision of Christ is embodied in communities of generosity, justice and peacefulness. Above all else, strive to be faithful to Christ's vision of the peaceable kingdom of God on earth. Courageously challenge cultural, political, and religious trends that are contrary to the reconciling and restoring purposes of God. Pursue peace. There are subtle yet powerful influences in the world, some even claiming to represent Christ, that seek to divide people and nations to accomplish their destructive aims. That which seeks to harden one human heart against another by constructing walls of fear and prejudice is not of God. Be especially alert to these influences, lest they divide you or divert you from the mission to which you are called." This section was added to the Doctrine and Covenants by the 2007 World Conference, and it speaks just as poignantly today as it did then. Recently, I have noticed lots of people writing about the growing polarization in the world. From my personal experience, it feels like there is more division now than I recall from previous years. My perspective might be intensified, because I am so passionate about peace, reconciliation and healing of the spirit. And it feels like the world is moving further away from this state. On a personal note, that concerns me at a very deep level. My husband

and I were recently blessed with twin grandbabies, and this has given me a whole new level of commitment to doing all I can to provide them and all children a better future. Some would use Jesus's own words, as recorded in Matthew 10 and Luke 12 to state that division is inevitable. In Luke 12, verse 51 we read that Jesus said, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division." I encourage you to read the whole passage. It is intense and seems out of character from the rest of the scriptural descriptions and sayings of Jesus, the peaceful one. In Community of Christ's sermon helps about this scripture, it states, "the work of redemption inevitably brings division, though the kingdom of God is one of reconciliation and peace, it is not always easily received and often rejected." Proclaiming Christ's new community is always divisive, because it requires us to choose who and what will guide our lives. When we commit to follow Christ, we must prepare for the opposition we will face. I fully support this interpretation, but I also want to make sure that as a church, we are not getting to points of division on various topics, and then just assuming that we have met the opposition we are called to stand against. Sometimes division is just a temporary hurdle that the group must move beyond. To stay divided, is to come to a standstill, where both sides likely feel equally right and justified in their position, and the greater good is not pursued. If both sides stop listening to each other at this point, change for the better cannot happen. The context and status of the situation is more or less frozen. Fortunately, Community of Christ has two tools that can help us as a body to continue respectfully listening and not just accept the frozen state of division. These two tools guide us as we engage in important and often difficult conversations about how to respond to the topics that matter most as we seek to live Christ's mission and seek God's vision of shalom. The first tool is the six lenses to discover God's will. If you are not familiar with these, I would encourage you to learn more by typing in discernment in the search engine on cofchrist.org. These lenses remind us that it is important to approach complex questions and topics through the openness of discernment and from the different perspectives of Scripture, history, experience, reason, revelation and common consent. In this way, we often find the holy in unexpected places, such as me learning important discipleship principles from the Garth Brooks story. If you are like me, you will likely discover that you tend to depend on a few of the lenses more than the others. That's why discovering God's will is a community task working with the Holy Spirit. We all have biases and perspectives that need to be overcome in moving from our own will to embrace God's will. Respectfully listening to each other, especially those with perspectives different than our own, and listening to the Holy Spirit, opens our minds to new ways of understanding. Discerning together allows us to use the best interpretation of each one to look for the greater good as guided by the Holy Spirit. The second tool is the principles of faithful disagreement. Faithful disagreement, as used in Community of Christ, is not a position that we take as we surround ourselves with people who share the same position, avoiding others with whom we faithfully disagree. Faithful disagreement is a way of action that keeps us together as a community. It is the community making space for people holding different views about a specific policy, belief, principle or other position of Community of Christ when approached respectfully in Christ, like love, exploring disagreement within a group is helpful, responsible, faithful and bounded by loyalty and commitment to the identity, mission, message and beliefs of Community of Christ. The principles of faithful disagreement guide us in how to create a culture that is equipped and safe to engage in respectful dialog about contentious topics while remaining united in our overall shared mission. These principles help us experience the blessings of community, even when working through difficult conversations and topics. You can download the faithful disagreement principles from cofchrist.org on the resource page. With the Lenses for Discovering God's Will and the principles of Faithful Disagreement, we are better equipped as a faith

community to have important conversations about how we courageously challenge cultural, political and religious trends that are contrary to the reconciling and restoring purposes of God as encouraged in Doctrine and Covenants 163 paragraph, 3b. In a world that feels like it is becoming ever more polarized, I pray that we create signal communities of justice and peace that reflect the vision of Christ as described in Doctrine and Covenants 163, paragraph 5a. Let us signal to the world that we cannot stop listening to each other when difficult questions divide us. Let us signal that when we are divided, we must listen even more intently to all viewpoints and to the leadings of the Holy Spirit. We must look through different lenses for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We must make safe spaces for faithful disagreement as we remain committed to live Christ's mission together, we must trust that through our collective discernment, we will find the points of agreement where we can unite in making progress, in building God's peaceable kingdom on earth. I pray that we can create these types of signal communities in the world which desperately needs to experience all the dimensions of Christ's peace.

Blake Smith 19:47

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