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Jessica: Welcome to Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived.  
We're exploring the ways in which theology permeates all aspects of life.  
Through conversations with the faculty here at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,  
we will challenge you to deepen your theology and live out your faith in Christ.  
I'm your producer and host, Jessica Bordeleau.  
I'll talk with a variety of professors on a variety of topics,  
something different every episode,  
but all pointing to the intersection between faith and daily life,  
when it's Tangible: Theology Learned and Lived.  
Today, I'm talking with Dr. Michael Zeigler.  
As the current speaker of the Lutheran Hour,  
his weekly sermons are broadcast over 800 radio stations in the US alone,  
with over one million listeners worldwide every week.  
Dr. Zeigler, it's an honor to have you in our studio.

Michael: Thanks for having me.

Jessica: A few years ago,  
you wrote a book called Christian Hope Among Rivals.  
Then last September, you spoke on that topic at  
the Theological Symposium here at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,  
addressing the theme of hope.  
Your presentation was called Hope Among Rivals, Matching Pace.  
It was great. You opened the presentation with  
a story about a time when you walked barefoot with a friend.

Michael: Yeah. I called this friend Craig in the story.  
It was this last summer.  
He was visiting from out of town.  
His great aunt had just died and he was there for the funeral.  
So we had a chance to catch up and we went for a walk in the park.  
My wife, Amy, had just gotten me a new pair of shoes that were not fitting very well.  
I noticed that just a few minutes into the walk,  
they started hurting the back of my heel.  
I could feel blisters already starting to form.  
So I took off my shoes,  
which is not normally what I do,  
but I figured this is better than walking in pain the whole time.  
He looked at me funny.  
He's like, well, what are you doing?  
I explained why I'm doing this.

Without explaining or without saying anything,  
he was wearing Birkenstocks.  
He took off his Birkenstocks and walked barefoot with me too.  
It just struck me that that's a pretty profound thing to do.  
What that forced him to do then was walk at my pace  
rather than feeling like I was slowing him down because he had shoes and I didn't.  
I felt like that was a really good picture of how we can walk with others in hope  
by matching pace with them and maybe seeing the world through their eyes  
and try to feel what they feel.  
Rather than just keep our shoes on and proceed as normal.

Jessica: How does that fit in with hope and Christian hope?

Michael: You mentioned the book that I wrote.

It's called Christian Hope Among Rivals.

And that's a reworking of my dissertation, my PhD dissertation,  
which I did here at Concordia Seminary with Dr. Joe Okamoto.

He was my supervisor.

And in that book, I work out the question,

how is Christian hope similar to and different from other forms of hope?

And not just trivial hopes, but a hope that you would organize your whole life around.

Jessica: Yeah, that's a phrase you used in your presentation.

And I wanted to know more of what that meant, a life organizing hope.

Michael: Yeah. You can speak of everyday trivial hopes like,

I hope the package I ordered arrives today,

or I hope it doesn't rain tomorrow.

These are just kind of everyday trivial hopes.

But then there are bigger hopes that would frame your whole life.

Maybe another way to talk about it is the purpose of your life.

Your reason for getting up in the morning,

your reason to keep going when things get difficult.

That's what I would say is a life organizing hope.

And some people have these in a very clear and articulated way,

like Christians have a very clear articulated hope that we're, I look for the resurrection of the dead  
and the life of the age to come.

That's our clearly articulated hope.

Not everybody has a hope so well articulated, but I think we all live it implicitly.

And so back to the story about taking off your sandals to match pace with somebody.

As Christians, one thing we can do to walk with people is to try to see the world through their eyes  
try to understand what it is that keeps you going,

what it is that gives you a reason to get up in the morning.

And to understand that they are doing this, they are living by hope, just like we are as Christians.

Now it's a different hope, but I think it's a really helpful way.

It's not the only way to understand people's actions,  
but it's a helpful way to see people working out of hope.

Jessica: What are the rival hopes?

I mean, I understand the Christian hope and how that would get me up in the morning,  
or at least it'll help me sleep at night.

You know, it'll give me peace and direction.

What other hopes are there?

Michael: In the book, I offer a typology, so a conceptual map.

So I'm not doing specific comparative religions or comparative worldviews,  
but rather giving people, giving Christians a framework to understand how other people hope.

And a simplified version of it is to say there are two strategies,  
hopeful strategies that people work out in their lives.

And it all has to do with language, how we speak, how we frame things with our words.

So one strategy, one hopeful strategy is to reform the world to fit my words.

So I can try to reform the world by speaking instructions or directives.

So reform the world to fit my words.

Jessica: And you call that a specific kind of speech act.

Michael: Was that the directive speech act?

You can give directives, clean up this place, you know, fix your act, get it together.

You know, directives, I can give directives to the world to try to reform it to match my wishes,  
which are expressed through words.

The other strategy is to reform my words to match the world.

I can reconcile myself to the world as it really is.

So those two are opposite kinds of strategies.

I've been thinking a lot about forgiveness lately.

I'm doing a sermon series on forgiveness for the Lutheran Hour.

And I've been reading this memoir titled, What is a Girl Worth by Rachel Denhollander,  
I think is her name.

She is one of the young women, the gymnasts who came forward with the whole scandal about  
being sexually abused by the doctor who's now in prison, life sentence in prison without parole.

Here's an example of something of a behavior that is inexcusable.

Evil, inexcusable behavior.

And when we're faced with something inexcusable, we can try to reform the world so that it  
never happens again.

And when you're met with failure, when you're met with the world's unwieldy character, that  
it's just broken and we can't seem to fix it, instead of trying to reform the world  
faced with this inexcusable behavior, I can reframe my words and in some ways excuse the  
behavior because I know I can't fix it.

And a way to cope with it then is to redefine it.

Reconciling myself to a world that won't be reformed.

In a way, it's admitting my own inability to fix the world.

So you might call that enlightenment.

Now the hope is to achieve this internal enlightenment where I see that I can't fix the world, but I'm okay with that.

But what I've done there is now I've redefined this inexcusable behavior and have now in a sense made an excuse for it.

I've explained the problem away.

Jessica: It's like convincing yourself of a lie so you feel better.

Michael: Right.

But on the other side of that, you'll say that it wasn't a lie.

The lie was that I thought I could fix it.

So now I'm free from that arrogance to think that I could fix this world.

But again, like you said, we still are faced with these inexcusable things, these inexcusable behaviors.

And so I think what most people do is they kind of fluctuate between those two efforts, those two hopeful strategies.

I'm either going to reform the world or I'm going to reform my own perceptions of the world to reconcile myself to it.

But when I do that, I find that there's some things I just can't be reconciled to.

And then I go back to trying to fix things.

And as Christians, what we can say then is there's a little bit of truth in both positions.

And this may be where we can get back to matching pace with people.

I can take off my shoes and walk in the lived experience of another person and see that there's some truth to calling a behavior inexcusable, but what's untrue is that I can fix.

I can change the world or I can change myself even.

There's some truth in saying I can't change things, but it's not true to say that that is now excusable behavior.

Jessica: Is there a third choice?

What can I do?

Michael: So the third choice is grounded in a commissive speech act.

A commissive speech act would be like a threat or a promise.

And but what that requires is for you to depend on someone else.

The speaker commits him or herself to take action on behalf of or in the case of a threat against the hearer.

And as Christians, we have grounded our hope in the commissive speech act of Jesus of Nazareth, the son of God.

He has promised to do something about this world.

He gives threats about inexcusable behaviors and where they will lead if they're not turned from and repented of and forgiven.

And so we look to him, we depend on him to reform the world according to His word, not ours.

Jessica: So if these are rival hopes, and so these rival hopes then would motivate people to

be Buddhist and say everything is okay and be enlightened, or they would perhaps motivate people to want to take civic action to make sure it doesn't happen again.

Okay.

And those are rivaling hopes that have all these other worldviews that go with them.

Is that okay?

Michael: That's right.

Jessica: Yeah, that's a good summary.

Okay.

And so then as Christians, our hope is different because you're putting it into somebody else to do the thing we can't do.

Michael: That's right.

That's right.

So we would agree with, you mentioned the Buddhist, we would agree with the Buddhist that yes, I can't fix the world.

And there's a humility.

There's a humility that we can share with an adherent of Buddhism.

Buddhism has this humbled approach to the world that it is what it is and I can't fix it.

And that I try to fix it is the cause of all my problems in fact, because I'm playing God.

We can agree with a Buddhist and all that.

Just read the book of Ecclesiastes.

That's basically the message of Ecclesiastes.

But where we stop is to say, but that doesn't mean this is how it is and how it always will be.

And then we can say, but there is someone who can put it right.

And then we can agree with the civic activist and say, and because he's going to put it right and because our God cares about things, then I should be doing stuff that honors his values in the present.

I should care for the oppressed.

I should speak out against injustice.

I should confront inexcusable behavior and call it what it is and speak truthfully about it and not make excuses for wrongdoing.

Again, back to this image of matching pace is when I take off my sandals, and so for a Christian, this might be the sandals would represent this certainty that our hope is above and beyond everybody else's and kind of in a class of its own.

I think if we take off our shoes, so to speak, and walk with other people, we can see that our hope is a lot like other forms of hope.

The core difference is that we place our hope in a person and his promises and his threats even, not in our own explanations, nor in our instructions to make the world or to reconcile ourselves with it.

Jessica: So we can't say we are the only ones who have hope, recognizing that they do as well.

That sounds a little universalism, doesn't it?

Michael: Yeah.

So then you have to square that with a thing like Paul would say in Ephesians chapter two. He'd say, he says to the Gentile believers, he said, remember when you were in the world, you were without God and without hope in the world.

And so there is a sense that a Christian has to say, this isn't real hope.

This isn't true hope.

It's only half true.

It's only a reflection of the truth.

Maybe a good analogy is like when Paul in 1 Corinthians chapter eight, I think it is, he's talking about the idols in the marketplace.

And he says that these are false gods.

They are real gods to the people there.

But then he'll say, but we know there are no other real gods and there's no other gods in existence, but for those people, they count as such.

So again, same thing with hope.

We can say that a non-Christian is without hope, but in the same breath, but from a different angle, we can say, but they have hope.

It's real hope.

It's just hope in the wrong thing and therefore another form of idolatry.

Jessica: And so if we don't recognize that their experience is authentic, they won't listen to what we have to say.

Michael: They won't be able to slow down and try to understand the truth in their position.

Because there is some truth, like Paul says, an idol has no real existence.

The only thing that you can make an idol of is a good creation of God.

You take a good creation of God and then you twist it into something else.

But there's nothing else available to us to make idols out of, just the good creation.

So this desire to fight evil, to correct injustice, to make the world better, that's good.

That's from God.

The only reason we want to is because He's written His law in our hearts, His directions in our hearts, and everyone's trying to work this out in their own flawed human way so we can affirm that as a good gift of God.

But if we put our full weight on that, if we put our full hope in that, then it becomes an idol.

Jessica: So if we have our shoes off so that we can walk at the same pace with the people that we are loving in the world, how do we show them that our shoes are pretty good?

Michael: Well, in the case of the story that I opened with my friend, again calling him Craig, he's not a Christian.

And so I've known him for almost a decade.

And I've had many talks with him, many walks with him.

And I've seen him trying to take up both of these strategies.

And on that walk, in fact, he was very open with me.  
I've seen him trying to fit the world to his wishes and make a life for himself.  
And on that very walk, he confessed to me, he said, I've got all this stuff.  
I've got plenty of money.  
I've got a lot of satisfaction in a job that I love.  
I've got a family, people and friends, but I still feel empty inside.  
I think when we walk with people and they come to that moment of truth, that's where we can bear witness to the hope that we have in Jesus.  
So I share that hope that I have in Jesus with Craig, but I can also learn from him.  
So like I mentioned, he's the one who took off his sandals and walked with me.  
And the reason this was so profound is because the week before, I had been walking in the park with my family one evening and Amy's sandals, the strap broke and it was digging into her foot.  
So she took off her sandals and was walking barefoot.  
But I just kept on walking with my good shoes at that point.  
And the thought never even occurred to me that I might take off my shoes and walk barefoot alongside her.  
But instead, I was just annoyed that she was walking slowly.  
So again, there's this case of a non-Christian teaching me how to love, how to empathize with another human being.

Jessica: What difference does this make for the church's witness in the world?

Michael: I think the first thing it can do is help us admit that we struggle in our hope just like everybody else.

It's not that we have this internal psychological certainty about our hope.

We have to rely on another person.

We rely on Jesus to show up and do what he promised.

And along the way, we struggle because, again, we're faced with these inexcusable things.

My wife Amy, for instance, she works with refugees and immigrants in the city of St. Louis.

And she was telling me about this case of human trafficking and child abuse and this scandal that came out.

And we're confronted with these inexcusable things.

And she and I were talking about it this morning and I encouraged her to memorize a Bible verse and carry it with her that day as she was just haunted, horrified by these images of child abuse.

I gave her the scripture Exodus chapter 34, 6 and 7.

It's God's description of himself.

He says, the Lord, the Lord, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love, keeping love for thousands, forgiving, guilt and rebellion and sin.

That he will not hold the guilty unpunished or he will not clear the guilty.

And so it's this confidence in God that he is loving and just at the same time.

And he's going to put things right and He's going to do it in a way to save all who look to Him and trust Him for forgiveness.

Amy, after we had this conversation, she said, but it just feels so far away.

And I think we all are faced with this.

We know the truth about God.

We have hope that Jesus is going to come and put things right.

He's already done so on the cross in a mysterious way and the cross and resurrection that we can't fully understand.

But sometimes it just feels so far away.

And I think just having that posture with other people who don't share our hope in Christ can again help us walk with them.

That we don't have to pretend like we don't also struggle with the evil that's still in the world.

And we don't have to try to excuse these inexcusable things as a way of protecting our internal certainty about what we believe.

We can just give these things to God like the psalmist's do and cry out to God and lament.

So I think that's the one thing is it helps us shed a false certainty about our faith

so that we can reclaim certainty in Jesus and His promises or at least walk towards

that through struggle and doubt.

Jessica: But aren't we supposed to be certain?

I mean, we're supposed to have a sure and certain hope that if we're not sure, how would we help someone else be sure?

Michael: One distinction that I found helpful in that talk at the symposium was a difference between an internal certainty and an external certainty.

So the example might be, I just moved recently and you promised you were going to meet me at the new house to help unload my moving truck.

But as I'm waiting in front of my house and the moving truck has just arrived, but you're not there yet, what kind of certainty do I have at that moment?

I may not have internal psychological certainty that you'll make good on your promise.

I might wonder, did she get delayed or maybe she got overcommitted.

But no, I know that you're a faithful person and you're good on your word and you keep your promises.

And I have this long track record of a friendship with you.

And if Jessica said she's going to be there, she'll be there.

I have external certainty in the sense that I know that you have a certain quality about you.

You're faithful.

You're reliable.

In the moment though, I have to wait for you to show up.

I'm not in control in that moment, even as I struggle with my own internal doubts about your character.



But your character objectively is reliable.

There is external certainty about your character, but there may be internal psychological uncertainty about my relationship to your character at that moment.

Jessica: Couldn't you have an internal doubt that that is that true character?  
Couldn't you inside be like, maybe I don't really know her?

Michael: Absolutely.  
Absolutely.

And that's what Christians wrestle with in terms of God and Jesus and His promises.  
We wrestle with that all the time.

But then you have these passages like the one you mentioned, a sure and certain hope, or I think of Luke chapter one, Luke writes to Theophilus, I write you this so that you may be certain about the things that you have been taught.

So of course, internal certainty is part of the goal, part of our sanctification, but it's a process on the way.

I don't think any of us possess it.

At least every Christian I've ever known doesn't possess it right now.

Jessica: I suppose if they're being honest.

Michael: That's right.

And so again, back to this matching pace, I think opening up about these things helps us be honest and helps us relate better to someone who doesn't know Jesus yet.

Internal certainty is the goal.

That's why Luke writes the Gospel of Luke.

But because we haven't arrived at the goal yet means that we have to still keep reading Luke.

I have to keep going back to that story and Matthew and Mark and John all the time because I have not yet reached the goal that these Gospel writers have for us and giving them that we would be certain of Jesus and His character.

Jesus' character is already certain externally.

I have to wait to catch up.

And it's a lifelong process called sanctification.

And we can see this in other parts of scripture.

You think of the father who brought his boy to Jesus.

And Jesus says, if you believe, all things are possible for those who believe.

And the man says what?

Jessica: I believe, help my unbelief.  
I pray that prayer when I'm not sure.

Michael: Yes, absolutely.

Jessica: And Jesus still listened to him.

That's so comforting.

He didn't say, well, if you're not sure, come back later.

Michael: Yeah.

So internal certainty is the goal.

It's just none of us have arrived at it yet.

And so we still need to keep going back to God's word again and again and again.

And one day he promises to make us certain in our hope, even as He is now certain in His own character.

He's faithful.

He's reliable.

Another word of caution in the scriptures is from 1 Corinthians 10 verse 12.

Paul says, let anyone who thinks he stands take heed, lest he fall.

So again, there's this real possibility that our doubts could overwhelm us.

We could be taken by one of these other strategies, thinking that I can fix the world or thinking that I can redefine the world on my own terms.

All of these rival hopes are still active, sometimes persuasive to Christians, sometimes pull people away from faith.

So that's why it's a real rivalry that still goes on.

But we fight it not by issuing better directives or more accurate assertions, but rather speaking and clinging to the promises and acknowledging the threats of God that are still before us.

Jessica: A few years ago, I was in a conversation with you about doubting Thomas, who was in the same boat.

He doubted.

He wasn't there when Jesus showed up in the upper room and they were talking about what had happened.

He's like, once I see it, I'll believe it.

Once I can put my hands in the holes in his hands, then I'll believe it.

And I never forgot this.

This has been very helpful to me in my faith.

You said, but he didn't leave the upper room.

He stayed with the community of believers.

It wasn't as if these doubts mean that I don't belong in church.

I'm not sure.

So I guess I must not be a Christian.

But he stayed in the upper room and Jesus showed up.

Michael: That's yeah, that's that's a great insight.

Thanks for reminding me.

I said that I forgot I said that I probably heard it from somebody else.

But it's true that just because you have doubts doesn't mean that Jesus isn't still for you.

And that's what makes us Christians is Jesus being for us.

It's not it's not my faith is just a reception of his faithfulness.

It's not the cause of His faithfulness.

And so even when my faith wavers, His faithfulness doesn't waver.

Jessica: Now, you're not a parish pastor now.

But in the past, you were a parish pastor here in St. Louis at a city church.  
And you have a whole military career as a lieutenant colonel in the US Air Force.  
But I know you still volunteer here working with immigrants with your wife and your kids every week in after school tutoring programs.  
You have this experience with real people outside of the church.

Jessica: One thing this helps me do is remember the importance of the Christian community, just like you were saying with Thomas, the people that we work with through the local refugee ministry have been through a lot of a lot of hard things have experienced inexcusable behavior on mass systemic scales with corruption and warfare in a country and betrayals and awful awful things.  
I can't explain it away.  
I don't even have the words.  
I don't have the words to connect with them.  
So I can't I can't explain it away, but I can be there with them in the name of Jesus.  
I can help be a small part of a Christian community that is embracing them in there in the difficult times that they're passing through.  
And in that way, we can preach with our deeds, so to speak.  
We can demonstrate the faithfulness of God as it's reflected in the way we are a Christian community for these folks that have been through these terrible things.  
This research has helped me remember that the Christian faith isn't just an idea or an explanation of the world.  
It isn't just a set of instructions on how to live.  
Ultimately, it is a confidence in a person, Jesus Christ.  
It is trust in His Word and His faithfulness.  
And so bringing someone to that faith isn't just giving them the right information or telling them the right things to do.  
It is showing them the faithfulness of Jesus in our actions.  
Because ultimately, that's what we're concerned with is how they relate to Jesus, how they lean on Jesus, how they know Jesus.  
And so of course, there's a time for words.  
Of course, there's a time for instructions and a time to teach.  
But ultimately, we are helping them relate to a person.  
And we're doing that through our interactions with them.

Jessica: So one more question before we're done.  
What do you want everybody listening to this show to know?

Michael: I would encourage you, as you speak to the faithful about how to live the Christian life, how to be faithful to Jesus, think about the unbeliever who's overhearing you and how you talk and try to put things in ways that can match pace with where they are.  
So this may be speaking in longhand, explaining what we mean by terms that we use or insider talk and language.  
This is something that I'm trying to do more and more on the Lutheran Hour.

If you listen to the Lutheran Hour, I hope it doesn't just sound like another Sunday sermon, but rather it's truly directed to the person who doesn't know Jesus yet or doesn't follow Jesus yet.

And that's hard because we're used to this insider talk.

So I would encourage you to think about the non-Christian or the person who doesn't know Jesus, who may be in the room, who may be listening to the recording of your sermon that you put on the internet later on, or maybe visiting your church and you don't even know they're there or you don't know their background.

So just to be aware of that person in your midst and to speak in a way that could invite them in and include them.

Jessica: Dr. Zeigler, thank you so much for being here today.

If you'd like to hear Dr. Zeigler's symposium presentation, you'll find it on our website, along with more episodes of Tangible at [ConcordiaTheology.org](http://ConcordiaTheology.org).

I was privileged to co-host a weekly podcast with Dr. Zeigler for two years, and all 100 episodes of Speaking of Jesus are available online.

Check it out at [JesusPodcast.org](http://JesusPodcast.org).

I'm your host and producer, Jessica Bordeleau.

Join me next time for conversation about the intersection of theology and daily life.

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