

Crystal Karr

Broken and Beloved: An Ordination Paper

Submitted to

The Southeastern Association of the Rocky
Mountain Conference of the United Church of Christ

Part I. Faith Formation and Call

Throughout this journey I call my life, I've come to believe God has created all of creation in love and for good. As part of God's good and wondrous creation we have been invited to join God in the process of co-creation on a trajectory of love and justice. We have been invited to join in sharing of God's love and grace, helping to co-create a world which embraces all peoples everywhere being healed and restored in this community of faith that binds us together beyond time and space.

It's hard to say, "I was raised to believe..." because the truth is that I wasn't. I had many different people in my life who taught me many different things about God and the Bible. My father was and is Southern Baptist, my mother identifies as "Christian" without any specific church or denomination. I had an aunt and uncle that converted an old school bus into a trailer and would travel around doing tent revivals and Bible schools during the summer. They only ever talked about God and how if you didn't believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior you were going to burn in hell for all of eternity. From my aunt and uncle, I learned that faith was about not going to hell.

I loved going to Sunday school at my dad's church. My teacher was Mary; she was the sweetest and kindest soul. She taught me all about the love of Jesus. From Mary I learned that Jesus loved me and loved everyone else too. Jesus wanted us to be kind and loving to each other. When we went to church that was another story. The preacher's face burned bright red as he shouted about eternal damnation, about the flames that would lick our faces for all eternity unless

we accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. During those sermons, I'd pretend that Jesus was right there holding my hand, telling me that he loved me and that I didn't need to be afraid.

My mom and I church hopped for several years. We visited Nazarene, United Methodist, Baptist, non-denominational churches; we tried them all. There was one church that stopped our church hopping. We'd been attending for several months when they hosted a Mother's Day Brunch. My mom went to sign up for it but was told that while *she* could not attend, she could send me. She wasn't welcome to do more than attend church because she was a divorced woman living in sin. My mom left my dad because he was an abusive husband. He left her with bruises. Numerous times he threatened to kill her and her family. He left holes punched in the walls to remind her of what he could do to her. She stopped attending church after that. Mom always encouraged me to attend church with my friends; yet she only ever dropped me off, she never came in. Her faith in God remains strong but her faith in church folk has never been fully restored.

What I have learned from my youthful experiences of Christianity is that we cannot seek to be good and holy at the expense of love and compassion. The women who informed my mom that she was not welcome at the Mother's Day Brunch were more concerned with the appearance of holiness than with love. My aunt and uncle were more concerned with righteousness than with grace and love. What has stayed with me in the core of my being is from my Sunday school teacher, Mary: Jesus is all about love, grace, and kindness. In those times that I left church, I never left Jesus. He continued to hold my hand and give me courage through the roughest parts of my life.

Most of my church experiences were tribal, meaning that if you wanted to belong you must think, act, and worship in the same ways that the group did. When I asked too many questions I got in trouble. In some of the churches I attended, the same racism that existed within the community at large also found their home within the church. As I neared college I began to believe that churches were mostly full of hypocrites. However, as I matured I began to realize that I too struggled against my own hypocrisy and challenges of racism. I also missed church and believed that somewhere in the mess of Biblical stories, church folk, and faith there was a better way. I longed for my children to have the positive side of church and community that kept me returning as a youth, even when it wasn't perfect.

My husband, Joel, and I found a United Methodist Church up the corner from our home in the Kansas City metro-area. We began attending with our daughter, Merkin. I thoroughly enjoyed it. I helped out with the youth group at church, attended adult Sunday school, and went to the Women's Fellowship meetings. Joel liked it and joined the finance board. Merkin was three and *loved* church. She loved it so much that if she was misbehaving, we'd tell her she wouldn't be able to go, she'd immediately changed her ways. When I was pregnant with our second daughter, Valerie, and then our youngest daughter, Ainsley, the church gave us lovely baby showers and cooed over the girls. We were surrounded by a loving faith community.

I heard the call to ministry at a "40's and Under Women's Retreat" led by a female pastor. It was the first time I had actually experienced a female pastor for myself. Before this I'd only heard my paternal grandfather's grumblings about them. She was funny and intelligent, and the way she shared the story of Tamar was unlike anything I'd heard before. I was in awe. As we

settled into meditative prayer I experienced my call to ministry. It's difficult to put into words even though I've written the story down before; each time I try to write it, I get choked up and struggle to find the right words.

I knew I was in the presence of God. I saw some pivotal moments from my life and hearing without sound. I knew that God wanted me to go into ministry, that everything in my life had led me to that particular moment in time and space. I was finally in a place where I could not only hear God's call for my life but believe it. I was in shock. I couldn't talk. Tears rolled down my face. I packed my bags, when my roommate asked if I was okay, I nodded yes. By the time I got home, my face was a mess, my eyes were red and my cheeks were streaked with mascara. Joel rushed up to me and asked me if I had been in a car accident. I said, "No, it's worse than that! I think God wants me to be a minister!" Joel was understandably surprised and replied, "Maybe you heard wrong, maybe you just need to do more at church."

I tried that for a little while but that wasn't my calling, my calling was for ministry. I spent the next three and a half years pursuing my seminary education at Saint Paul School of Theology. After seminary graduation I agreed to go to a congregation in western Kansas. It was a seven hour drive from Kansas City so the District Superintendent announced my name in the church that Sunday. Monday morning I received at least three emails from folks in the town. They had googled me and found my seminary blog. The most recent post I had written contained pictures and what I thought was a funny story about the cross tattoo on my back. According to the emails I received, I was not going to be welcome in neither their town nor their church. I was not going to be allowed anywhere near their youth, even if my tattoo was of a cross (Joel said it

was too bad they hadn't scrolled down to see my large tattoo of Mary as it would have really freaked them out). I was terrified; Joel had already put in his four week notice at Hallmark. I knew small Kansas towns and my children would pay for the anger directed at me. I cried tears of relief when the District Superintendent called to rescind the appointment saying, "it wouldn't be safe" for my family.

Thankfully, Joel was able to keep his job at Hallmark and my Kansas City Missouri District Superintendent had a two-point charge (two small churches within 20 miles of one another) for me in Mound City, a part of the Pony Express District in the northeast corner of the state. My new District Superintendent explained that this was a very conservative area and I'd need to cover my tattoos and keep my opinions to myself. I was relieved but scared to pieces.

Moving day was the first of July. The Midwest is dreadful in the summer, hot as hades and muggy as a steam room. It was time for me to go and meet the board of the smaller church, Sharp's Grove UMC. I was full of nerves but I wasn't about to put on jeans given the weather. I held my breath as I walked into the church. As I shook hands and introduced myself, one of the men complimented my Mary tattoo that covers my right calf. For the next ten minutes the board and I compared tattoos. As I drove home to Mound City tears streamed down my face in pure joy. At least in one of my churches, I was free to be my authentic self.

The Sharp's Grove UMC was my safe place in northwest Missouri. It was a small church barely maintaining itself but it was a place of love, grace, and healing in the middle of a cornfield off of an old county road. Sharp's Grove showed me what I hope to bring to any church I have the honor to pastor: vulnerability. One Sunday morning during joys and concerns, one of the

couples shared that they were struggling. The husband had received a DUI that night. He was at risk of losing his job and their marriage was rocky due to his drinking. He broke down crying and as a church we gathered around him and prayed. My planned service went out the door, instead we spoke about God meeting us where we are at, how God offers us grace rather than condemnation. It was one of the most beautiful church services that I've ever been blessed to be a part of. At Sharp's Grove no one hid behind being "good." We all entered the church as we were...broken by the world and beloved by God. We weren't perfect and no one expected perfection, we only expected to show up in love and support. There were challenges, we didn't always agree. It wasn't about being the same, it was about love and support in God's name. What I learned during my time pastoring and preaching in Mound City and Sharp's Grove was how to talk to people where they are at. I learned much about grace and understanding. I learned that I could fall in love with people that I hold little in common regarding our politics and social stances.

When we returned to Colorado to live near our families, I took time to wrestle with whether or not I belonged in the UMC. In both my life and ministry, I witnessed the damage done to the lives of people in the LGBTQ+ community in the name of God, including within the UMC. I witnessed the damage done to youth who came out and instead of familial support they received condemnation, a few sent away for conversion therapy. I witnessed the pain of a woman in her 40s who despite her church leadership, despite her deep faith in God, despite that she was a kind and loving Christian, feared that she was on a train bound for hell because she was attracted to women instead of men. Those hellfire and brimstone messages she had received growing up in a conservative evangelical church never left her; they haunted her and brought her

to the brink of despair more than once or twice. All this hurt and anguish was caused not by God but by church, others believing that their version of being good meant more than love and grace. I came to a place where standing in the middle wasn't enough anymore. I could no longer be a part of a church that let its members actively hurt others in the name of God. I just couldn't do it anymore. I knew how it felt to be hurt by the church and the deep ache it creates. I decided that rather than trying to fight a broken system that my heart was in active ministry with people who traditionally the church has kept out.

That's when I began visiting United Church of Christ churches. The UCC had long ago decided that ministry included all and that the church had "no eject button" as the wonderful UCC ads proclaimed. I knew I found my home when I visited Vista Grande Community Church. It was a small and welcoming congregation. Despite its smallness, it was and continues to be immensely diverse. There were and are people of multiple genders, sexualities, ethnicities, social status, and ages all present at Vista Grande. During worship and fellowship time their love for one another shone through any social divides that might normally keep people from approaching one another. I left that first Sunday at Vista Grande feeling and thinking, "This is what I want to be a part of."

Part II: Theology

As a child, I did not believe in dinosaurs. I believed in Genesis' beautiful creation story in which God breathed life into all of creation and called it good, very good. I didn't understand how someone could dig bones out of the earth and put them together like a puzzle without any reference. At least with a puzzle you had a picture on the box to help. I thought it was some

crazy conspiracy. As long as I can remember I have loved this story of God breathing life into creation. I have imagined God as a young child in a sandbox, playfully and lovingly crafting creatures and humans with sand and water, then breathing into their mouths and them coming to life.

I now understand that dinosaurs did exist and I continue to believe that creation was made with God's love and goodness. I believe that humans are imbued with God's love, grace, creativity, and curiosity (just a few of the ways in which humans were made in God's image). This means that we were created for love, forgiveness, creating, and learning. We were created for good. Throughout my seminary journey I struggled with this idea of original sin. No matter how I turned it, or what frame of reference I used, it didn't set well with me. I know that sin is in our world; I know that brokenness surrounds us but I cannot embrace or give credence to original sin. What I find through the biblical witness is Original Good. Our story of Jesus is laden with finding the good, the divine not only in humankind but in all of creation. For me, the Incarnation (as story or in literal flesh and bone) is more evidence of this original good. God herself did not simply appear and walk upon the earth, rather she put on flesh and bone, she lived a life that started in the womb of Mary. This decision to begin as we begin, to embrace this earthly life was in itself a declaration that this earthly life is sacred.

God joined us in the muck and the mire. God was born a child not to royalty but to peasants with drama (remember, they had no place to stay, NONE of Joseph's family welcomed them in when they went to Bethlehem). This past year, I led the Women's Retreat for Vista Grande Community Church, our theme was "Scandalous and Sacred." We read through the

genealogy from Matthew (yes, that boring list of names) and picked out the five woman who managed to get remembered. They were: Tamar, who tricked her father-in-law into getting her pregnant by posing as a temple sex worker (Genesis 38); Rahab, a sex worker who saved Israelite warriors (Joshua 2); Ruth, whose romance with Boaz has been seriously watered down (Book of Ruth); “Wife of Uriah,” who is Bathsheba and unfairly accused of being a harlot (2 Samuel); and Mary an unwed young pregnant girl who hears and sees angels (Matthew 1 and Luke 1). This was not exactly a good and righteous lineage.

God’s birth took place not in a clean hospital, nor even a clean room; rather, Jesus was birthed among other animals. Often in the birthing process, a mother excretes feces prior to the baby pushing its head through the vagina. It’s a mess, it’s gross, and as Christians we have cleaned the story up so it’s like a magical birth in which Mary felt no pain, she did not cry out, and little baby Jesus gently emerged from her womb probably not even touching her vagina.

When Jesus went to heal a blind man on the side of the road, what did he do? In John’s account (9:1-12), Jesus spits onto the ground and makes a paste of mud with his saliva and the dirt, he takes this disgusting concoction and spreads it on the man’s eyes, then tells him to wash it off in the pool of Siloam. Sure enough, the man’s blindness is cured. In the other Gospels Jesus also uses his spit to heal the blind. Jesus spit or no, it’s not sanitary and it’s certainly not clean, yet it is sacred.

As humans we spend so much time trying to be good and holy -to earn God’s love- that we become sin-full and lose our ability to love and offer grace. We lose our drive to create and ask questions. We miss out on those blessings that God has imbued within us. We become

self-righteous, one of the things Jesus clearly warns against throughout the New Testament. Like the Pharisees we become obsessed with what appears clean on the outside and Jesus calls us to look and see if we are clean within (Luke 8: 37-53)

Some within the church understand baptism as making us clean like Jesus. They ask questions about why Jesus needed baptism if he was without sin. For me, baptism more than a cleansing of sin; it is a reorientation to life, a sign of to whom we belong, to whom we are promised and beloved. Baptism is a remembrance of our creation, of when God took sand, clay, and water to create and breathe life into us. It reminds us that we are beloved, that God calls our name and declares us good. The beauty is that a raindrop, a shower, or a glass of water when we thirst can remind us whose we are.

Throughout the New Testament, Jesus uses everyday objects, welcomes and shows love and heals unclean and lowly people. One of my favorite examples of this is the story of the parable of the mustard seed (choose from Matthew, Mark, or Luke). Two thousand years later, a mustard seed doesn't seem too unusual or shocking, but if we had been listening to Jesus directly, that story would have shook us up...questioning why on earth would we plant a mustard seed...a seed that could easily fester and over take our gardens or fields as a weed. We couldn't just plant it willy nilly since Leviticus dictates what and where we plant. Jesus inundated us with parables that we've watered down; we cannot hear their scandalous details in our modern times. Jesus flips the narrative when we become self-righteous and attempting to scale back on what is and who can be called sacred.

Why? Why would God choose to put on flesh and bone? Why would God choose to become one of us? The only possible answer is love. The United Church of Christ's Statement of Faith states, "You seek in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin." God saves us from a life without purpose and from sin. So what is sin? In seminary, I learned that the Biblical definition is simply, "to miss the mark." When I hear "miss the mark," I think of trying to bake a cake and forgetting to put in baking soda and thus it doesn't rise. Normally, I wouldn't consider baking a flat cake a sin. In our culture sin is a heavy word, laden with degrees of terrible things such as stealing, assault, murder, etc. We don't like to talk about sin; generally, we try to make sin into something that other people do and not ourselves.

I best understand sin and this idea of missing the mark as anything we put in the way of our relationship with God and others. This means I sin when I yell at my kids because I used up all of my patience at work. This means I sin when something is heavy on my heart and instead of talking to God about my feelings; I shut her out by numbing out with that flat cake I baked earlier. Sin is all of those things that we do that intentionally or unintentionally damage our relationships with others and with God. That's still enormous, isn't it? I understand God to be continually calling out to us in love, that's what I believe the Biblical witness is all about, calling us to love God and love one another. This means that relationships are of primary importance. Our relationships with God, other people, and even the earth. We are all bound together in and through the love of God. Each time we do something to separate us, this is sin. Sin is not what God wants for us. God desires us to be in right relationships, relationships rooted in love and

grace, understanding and forgiveness. Relationships are hard and therefore we all “miss the mark.” We all fall short. We all sin.

I believe that sin is what killed Jesus, but not in the typical atonement theology sort of way. Rather, in my view the crucifixion was the human response to divine incarnate. So much love and grace, demonstration after demonstration of what love does, of how love heals and reaches out to the lost and proudly declares that all are worthy of God’s love, it was too much to bear. All of that love and healing shined a light on our sin, on how we have betrayed our divine good, how we have mistreated one another, how we have drawn lines to keep some people in and other people out. It was simply too much and we participated in the ultimate cruelty, we killed Jesus on that cross.

Then the most wonderful thing happened! God said, “I love you still.” Peter said three times that he didn’t know Jesus, who he was or what he was about. This was Peter, the guy who constantly rushed to say something to show Jesus how much he loved him but ended up saying the wrong thing, all the damn time. That same Peter denied Jesus and their relationship three times just as Jesus said he would. Yet, the risen Christ embraced Peter and invited him to follow. The risen Jesus did not ostracize Peter or berate him, he simply loved him.

Whether a beautiful story or a literal resurrection, Jesus’ story, God’s story of love did not end. God’s story and love continued on through the witness of the disciples and through the witness of the church as it grew. The witness of God’s love continues today despite the muck and mess of this world in which we continue to argue to the death about who is right and who is wrong about God. Despite our sin, despite our broken human relationships, two thousand years

later, God still calls out to us in love. God's love does not fail. God's love still surrounds us and engages us. God is still with us. Sin may have killed Jesus but God's salvation began way back in the beginning; God's salvation was with us all along.

The Hebrew Testament is full of prophets and people who spoke on behalf of God. We can't be sure if Jesus was even a sparkle in God's eye when God called out to Abram and Sarai promising them as many descendants as stars in the heavens and sand in the seas. After some laughter and disbelief they became Abraham and Sarah. Other prophets arose when something was amiss in God's eyes. Biblical prophets were not soothsayers and predictors of tragedy, rather they were the people that God gave a message to share, to bring the Israelites back to God. Some of the prophets were a little strange, like Ezekiel with grand and strange visions. Others, like Isaiah, are a bit easier to understand, as he proclaimed that God was angry with Israel because they had lost their way; they did not keep right relationships with God nor with one another. Isaiah proclaimed God's words, "When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." Israel had forgotten to take care of the oppressed, the poor, those who were alone in the world. God made clear through Isaiah that her desire was for people to be in right relationship with one another through mercy and justice.

Mercy and justice are dependent on right relationships. When our relationships reflect respect, honor, love, and grace we do not harm one another. We value and/or see the divine in

one another and take care of each other instead of acting out of greed, vengeance, and all other things that constitute violence, whether emotional or physical. God sent many prophets before Jesus and I believe that many have been sent since Jesus...Mother Teresa, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. are the first that come to mind. Prophets are those that shine a light upon our darkness, our sin, the ways in which we harm one another.

Today as I write, there are marches across the country to protest gun violence in the United States. This past year many marches have occurred to protest the injustices of our nation, the high rate of gratuitous killing of black women and men, women declaring that sexual assault and gender violence must end, LGBTQ+ people who want their love to be recognized and honored rather than being targeted by crimes of hate. When people complain that our world is going to hell in a handbasket, I am reminded of the prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others who protested the injustices of their world which have continued into ours. I believe that we are on a trajectory of love; while we are more dangerous than ever with our weapons and violent machinery, we are also standing together more and creating room to speak out against the “isms” and greed that have been trying to destroy our relationships seemingly since the beginning of time. God continues to speak to us through modern prophets and people who work for justice and peace.

Across from the United Nations building in New York City is the Isaiah Wall that states, “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation. Neither shall they learn war any more.” I remember standing before it, imagining how long God has been trying to urge us to live in peace, to honor one

another with respect and love, forgiveness and grace. We may be far from co-creating a world in which God rejoices with us because we have finally achieved lasting and loving peace, but I believe God continues to urge us forward on this trajectory and as we move closer we will unveil more injustices that we failed to recognize before. The journey will be long but God has not left us alone, God still speaks to our hearts and minds calling us to love and justice.

How does God speak to us? One way is through the Biblical witness, I choose the phrase Biblical witness rather than Bible because I think it is more accurate. Growing up surrounded by people who often said things such as, “The Bible says it, therefore I believe it,” I had to come to terms with what the Bible is to me. I would argue that for some the Bible has become an idol, a sin, as they have used it as a weapon against those who do not conform to their ideas of what is holy and sacred, what is good. The term, Biblical witness, attests to my belief that the Bible is not merely one perspective with one clear voice; rather, it is multiple voices and it is our duty to discern and understand its diverse messages.

God also speaks to us through the Holy Spirit, not a ghostly apparition but a voice that speaks into our hearts and minds. Sometimes it is a still small voice, at others a persistent urge or need to do something such as stopping to pick someone up alongside the road. At others it is a deep sense of knowing that we experienced the divine while talking to a stranger. I’ve heard the Holy Spirit speak through my child asking if we could keep food and water in the van so that when we saw homeless people on street corners we could give them food.

I felt the Holy Spirit as I walked the labyrinth at La Foret while preparing to write this paper. As I walked the path I stepped in and out of darkness, in and out of splashes of light. The

wind gently rustled the dry weeds. As I stepped towards the center, towards my call, the next step and next turn moved me toward the edge. Each time I followed and turned as directed winding through the rocks and trees. Each time, I thought “just a step closer” and I would be turned on the path leading me to the center. Yet, more often than not, there the path led me further, winding towards and away from the center. Finally I arrived. I sat in the circle of tree stumps and listened to the whispering weeds. In the center of the labyrinth the Holy Spirit assured me that all of my life has and will continue to be part of my ministry, my calling. I merely need to keep following the path before me and resist the urge to step over the rocks for there are no shortcuts. I understood that there is joy in the journey. Joy is to be had in taking each step. Joy is not reserved for sitting in the circle of tree stumps. My ministry happens while talking to a stranger waiting in line at the Post Office and it happens while offering the Bread of Life during the sacrament of Communion.

The same Holy Spirit that spoke to me while walking the labyrinth speaks to people all over the world. Sometimes in the United States, we forget that we are not the center of Christianity, that we are not the center of the world, let alone the universe. The Trinity calls to all people everywhere. All of creation has God’s breath of life running through it, no “ifs and or buts,” no exceptions. This is one of the reasons why I chose to get involved with the United Church of Christ.

My image of Holy Communion is all of humanity sitting at a tremendous table eating and drinking together, all are welcomed, no exceptions. Isaiah 11:6-9 reads,

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The

nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

I believe it is possible that we learn peace and that peace helps us to speak in love to one another. I don't know how to do this but I cannot give up that this is possible. When we partake of Holy Communion, it is remembering that all are welcomed at God's table, that even though the evil in this world murdered Jesus on that cross, God's love overpowered death. God's love is greater than death. God's love is greater than the evil and sin of this world. God's love and peace is open and available to all people.

We cannot stop talking and trying to work together across all of the divides that we humans have set up to keep some people in and other people out. It is messy and hard work, it hurts sometimes, but I believe that this is what God calls us to do. Through the incarnation, we are pulled deeper into this mess of life, deeper into the dirt and mud, deeper into the pain that others suffer. We are called to love the unlovable, heal the hurting, clothe the naked, provide homes for the homeless, feed the hungry, and work for justice. The list goes on and on. It can be overwhelming, but we are not alone. The Holy Spirit walks beside us. Jesus has shown the way, and God provides strength when we need it most. God leads us into communities of faith that love and support us when we think we cannot take one more step. Our communities of faith are these beautiful places in which we can take shelter from the world and be challenged to go back into the world in a new way.

I desire to co-create a church in which our hearts and minds are fully engaged. I desire a church in which we receive support and help others, giving them support when they need it. I

desire a church where it is safe to be vulnerable and also be protected. I desire a church where we have second, third, fourth, fifth, 70 times 70 chances to start again. I desire a church where we fight racism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, and all the isms that seek to tear us apart and tear people down. I envision a table in which all are welcome, even though we may respectfully disagree, we will stay at the table because we want to love and understand one another. At this table we will laugh and cry together, we will celebrate and mourn together. We will feed and nourish one another and bring others in to be fed and nourished. We will take meals and supplies to those in need under the bridges, in caves, on streets, wherever we find them. We will join this epic adventure together, we will be bold in love, and we will be daring in our faith. We will sin boldly and err on the side of love and compassion. We will share our stories of resilience. We will share our stories of faith. We will make every day an adventure and see the beauty that surrounds us. We will recognize the sacred in one another and in the world around us. When we fall, we will help one another up.

The good news is that these are things many people want to find at church and many churches are working to do what they can to live an embodied and full faith. I have found this among people who are drawn to the UCC. In visiting multiple UCC churches, I have observed a lovely mix of theologies and difference. Persons raised in other faith traditions, those born either into the UCC or its predecessor denominations, and long standing members comprise this wondrous UCC. All of us looking for something more, looking for a community of faith where they are welcome and are encouraged to think, act, and feel their faith. I have questioned with people trying to discern where God is at work in this world, what the Bible “says” and how it fits into our world. I have worshipped with people looking for a safe place to find their voice and not

be judged for their questions. I have worked for justice with people looking to engage with others to make this world a better place, people wanting justice because of their faith rather than in spite of it.

I believe that even in our churches where people are invested in being “good,” there is a natural human longing for vulnerability, a longing to truly be known and seen and embraced as beloved. The reality of church is that everyone has at least one story in which their heart has been broken and yet they got up to try again. There are women who have been abused by their husbands but have never shared their story. There are men who were sexually assaulted but shame has crippled their voice and prevented them from sharing their story. There are parents terrified of their sons and daughters’ mental health issues, worried that they may fall and lose their child forever. There are people struggling with addictions of all kinds. These people are already sitting in the pews, on church boards and teams. Sometimes they come and tell the pastor their stories hoping, for wise words and assurance that they are still beloved. The more we speak of these issues from the pulpit in a loving and healing way, the more these people will feel invited to come forward and share their stories. The more people who bravely share their stories, the more healing that can happen. The more that broken people realize that they are beloved, the more they will see the beloved in others. The more we see the beloved in others, the more likely we are to be in right relationship with them. The more right relationships we develop, the more justice and peace will take root in this world. The more justice fills the world, the closer we will get to co-creating God’s vision of peace in this world.

Part III: The United Church of Christ History and Polity

All Protestant churches arose out of the Reformation—Luther’s 95 Theses nailed to the Wittenberg Castle Church. The Roman Catholic Church loosely bound Western Christians together for centuries. There was diversity within the church and yet Luther and his 95 Theses have come to symbolize the start of denominationalism or the fracturing of Christianity into multiple sects. The thing I find most interesting is how the United Church of Christ seeks to be an open and uniting force in Christianity by enlarging the tent or the circle so that everyone is included rather than drawing a circle on the ground with the expectation that everyone should fit into it. Rather than burning heretics, the heretics are invited into the conversation and given voice.

In *The Evolution of a UCC Style: History, Ecclesiology, and Culture of the United Church of Christ*, Randi J. Walker writes,

...a definite settled identity is not possible, only a constant process of pressing onward toward the beloved community sitting down together with a Christ who embraces the whole world. The United Church of Christ is not simply invested in the institutional union of churches, but in the unity of humanity.

I believe this unity of humanity is what God has called us to and for. This is what I see in the life of Jesus, the calling forth of all peoples so that not even one is left out or left behind. That this radical love and grace be lived out among all peoples. When we remain humble in our efforts to live out this radical love and grace we are able to ask and pursue where we have fallen short and need to expand the circle. It is when we believe we are complete that we become dangerous. Part

of the UCC history and story needs to keep us grounded in this realization that our uniting is a continual process, it will never be complete until or unless we are gathered before God together.

The Reformation and Reformed churches gave us permission to disagree and make our disagreement heard. Through them we learned that the struggle for justice is part and parcel of the Gospel; what we believe matters in how we shape our lives. While we were able to voice dissent we were also reminded of what or who binds us together as Christians—Jesus the Christ. The Reformation demolished the hierarchy of the church; made Jesus and the Bible more readily accessible to people rather than depending on priests to disseminate the Word. John Robinson illustrates this beautifully in his farewell to the Mayflower, “...the Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of his Holy Word.” In other words, do not be afraid for God has more to share.

The Congregationalists’ gift seems to center on leadership and church politics. In the young North America congregations were insulated and allowed for rigid terms of membership and leadership. Yet, leaders like Anne Hutchinson, “woman of haughty and fierce carriage...of voluble tongue,” found their voice and managed to be heard. She preached in her own home for up to 50 people at a time! This was absolutely unheard of and her ideas were profound, espousing that any person might receive revelation from God, that God might use something other than the Bible to communicate. While the churches were often insulated and rigid, this in turn created a space for those on the outside (like Anne Hutchinson) to raise their voices with great courage, to draw near others who were ready to hear something new and invigorating to their faith.

Born into the UCC was a creative spirit of empowerment. For example, the African Church of Beacon Hill created a safe space for blacks to meet and worship, even meeting with whites to end slavery, bringing in speakers/preachers such as Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass. There was a sense that Christianity was for all people and it could be reflective of its community. Congregations did not have to abide by rules set out by another group or hierarchy.

The Christian Churches helped to form a sense of unity. They, too, rejected power from above and worked to create power alongside of one another. This is best illustrated by the “Christian Connection.” The “Connection” had 6 principles that joined people together: 1. Christ was the only head of the church; 2. The Bible was sufficient—no other book or revelation was needed; 3. Christian character was made, not born; 4. The right to have one’s own judgment regarding scripture and conscience; 5. “Christian” was a fitting name for followers of Christ; and 6. Unity was the goal of all Christians throughout the world. The “Connection” was reflective of the developing American spirit of Independence. Individuals were free to choose and understand their faith individually while also recognizing they could join forces for the betterment of all.

German Evangelicalism is an additional cornerstone on which the UCC heritage is built. German Evangelicalism arose from German immigrants who were disturbed that their children lacked formal religious education. Out of this fear, they reached out to pastors of other denominations in order for their children to receive both literacy and religion, ie. Sunday School. Education was of great importance to the German people and a tremendous piece of what they have shared with the UCC.

In the UCC we attempt to create space for a multitude of understandings and faith. We do not pit science against faith, or disrespect another set of values because they happen to differ from our own. As Walker states in UCC Style, the UCC is “beautiful, heady, exasperating mix of the pluralistic church.” The UCC does not fear education; instead we embrace it as continuing revelation.

No one perception of Christianity can encompass the wide berth of truth that exists. The UCC has been formed by diverse peoples and beliefs. Just as the UCC history demonstrates a beautiful diversity, our polity seeks to honor continuing growth in diversity by refusing to hold tight to dogmas and creeds. Instead of tightly formed polity, the UCC is bound by covenant. At the surface level, a covenant is an agreement between two or more people. There are housing covenant communities in which they agree to maintain their homes in a certain fashion that is beneficial to all involved. Covenant in the world of church goes deeper. God was the first to extend a covenant and in this covenant he promised Abraham and Sarah that as they followed him, he would bless them with more descendants than grains of sand in the sea, more descendants than stars in the skies. Biblical and church covenants are relational; they are not about simple agreements. Rather, they are promises that bind us not only to one another but also to God.

In a denomination as diverse as the UCC, we are bound to clash in theologies and beliefs from time to time. Covenant is what keeps us at the table, talking to one another, learning from one another, and preserving the relationship even when we do not believe or worship in the same way. Covenant creates a sacred space that binds us and assists in maintaining trust and respect.

Covenant allows us to be vulnerable with one another. Rather than being dependent on top-down rules, each congregation crafts their own policies and procedures on how they will organize the church. Some churches have memberships, while others have covenantal partnerships. Each church is allowed and encouraged by the national church body to govern themselves and honor the specific eccentricities of the local church.

Associations are where local clergy and lay persons gather and create geographical communities where local churches come together and hold one another accountable, offer support, educational opportunities, communal opportunities to celebrate and grieve together.

Associations are then gathered into regions referred to as Conferences. Each conference has a Conference Minister who provides leadership to the Associations and Congregations within the geographical region. Conferences typically provide yearly gatherings for fellowship and learning. These gatherings are where representatives from local congregations share their ministries with one another. The Conference Minister provides leadership as needed to local congregations and pastors. This includes stepping in to mediate if there is a major conflict between a pastor and congregation.

There is national leadership in the UCC that acts as one face and voice of the UCC, However, it does not stand at the top issuing instructions. The national leadership receives input from Conferences, Associations and congregations who put forth where they believe God is calling the church forward. Conferences, Associations and congregations may not always be on board with the national voice but they are invited and needed to remain at the table and participate in the discussion. This is how we remain faithful to our call that “All will be one.”

As I seek ordination in this beautiful and diverse UCC I am overwhelmed in gratitude to my varied experiences of church and voices of faith in my life. Like the UCC, I have learned something from each voice and experience. These experiences and voices have taught me that seeking justice is God's love and grace in action. Yet, justice must always be pursued in humility lest we become consumed by our own perceived goodness or righteousness. We must root ourselves in the knowledge that we are both broken and beloved. We, in turn, look for and recognize that others are also broken and beloved. When can embrace with them with the love and grace of God.

I excel in loving God's people. I sit with people in their brokenness. I dance with people in their joy. I walk with people in protest against injustice. I stand before them and speak the words God has placed upon my heart for them to hear. For me, this is the soul of ministry. I know that my place is set apart to serve God and God's beloved and broken people, helping them to heal and know they are beloved.

In my journey, I've loved the people of God in many ways. For eight years I ministered to those who attended church and "invisible parishioners" (community members who would come for spiritual support but still did not feel welcomed in the churches I served). Before and since these eight years of pastoral ministry, I have loved and served people without mentioning faith in secular settings. I still sat with them in their brokenness, danced with them in their joy, walked with them to protest injustice, and did what I could to help them heal, all without speaking of faith and God. In my actions, I have done my best to embody God's love and grace for them but I longed to do more. I long to minister with my whole heart rather than holding back

words of faith and God to fit my secular setting. Ordination will complete the circle of my ministry and work. Ordination will allow me to completely embrace this call that God has placed upon my heart.