

Well, here it is: a paper I swore I'd never write. To explain more about why I had no intention of seeking ordination, or how that changed, let me start with some background. I grew up in a northshore suburb of Chicago, and was actually baptized less than three blocks away from the church I currently call home in Evanston. Growing up, my family was socially Christian - we went to church and celebrated major holidays - and I'd say "generically Protestant" (my dad still claims that most Protestant denominations are fairly interchangeable). We went to the Presbyterian church around the corner, not because either of my parents came from Reformed backgrounds, but because it was close by and I was told the preaching was good. I attended Sunday School, and eventually youth group, though I knew little about the theology or ecclesiology of the church.

I am the oldest of three, and for more than a decade of my life, my family led a pretty quintessential American life - complete with AYSO soccer on the weekends, a swingset in the back yard and a family dog. Then in August of 1994, our Norman Rockwell-esque family moved halfway around the world, thanks to my father's job. Challenging as it was, especially at first, it was an experience all of us truly enjoyed. I attended grades six thru nine at a bilingual international school in Tokyo, Japan, where there was no racial or ethnic majority. Not only was this a wonderful opportunity to learn about new languages and cultures, but I also came to understand that people around me would often have a completely different perspective or thought process on any given topic. For example, not long after starting at my new school, I noticed one of my new friends wrote her "a" differently than I did (she wrote "a" and I wrote "ɑ"). I remember thinking it was very different from all penmanship I had learned thus far, though also

equally as effective as the letter “a”. That experience was just the beginning of my immersion into the normalcy of ‘other-than-me-ness.’

My experience upon returning to the States was definitely a ‘reverse culture-shock.’ I returned to the same northshore town and attended an upper-class, suburban, all-white high school that screamed homogeny, and I never really fit in. When I excitedly left for the College of William and Mary, I quickly became involved with the Presbyterian Church near campus, thanks to outreach done by the church and campus minister. I found deep spiritual connection with the staff and congregation at Williamsburg Presbyterian Church and came to enjoy partaking in church activities (even outside of campus fellowship). I did spend some considerable time contemplating pursuing parish ministry, and I struggled knowing that I would not be welcomed into the ranks of the clergy by the Presbyterian Church (USA). For both theological and social reasons, about which I was not comfortable lying, I wrestled with the thought that the church of my upbringing - the one that felt like ‘home’ - only ‘sort of’ accepted me.

In my second semester on campus, I met a dynamic and caring professor, who would later become my advisor and an adored mentor, who helped me find my love for learning, as well as navigate both personal and academic challenges throughout my college experience. As I was completing my degree Religious Studies, I applied to graduate school at Emory University, in an attempt to follow in the footsteps of this advisor. By the time I received my acceptance letter, it was clear to me that I needed to take some time off before continuing with school. So after graduation, armed with little more than a 22-year-old’s sense of invincibility, I boarded a plane for Tokyo with a duffel bag and backpack - *without* having secured a job, apartment or working visa. Gradually, I was able to establish myself in Tokyo, and my time there not only allowed me to live in the culture and language I love the most, it also allowed me to live according to me,

outside of anyone else's expectations. I love Japan immensely, and could not imagine my life without it.

During my time in Tokyo (round 2), I tried to find a church home, but had few options and nothing clicked well with me. While I missed ritualized Christianity, my spirituality found itself very much at home in the temples and shrines that litter themselves across the country. It was this time in Japan that helped me understand the universality of my faith and theology - the God that I worship is not housed solely within the doors of a church. For example, I strongly resonate with the reverent and sacred views of nature held by the Buddhist and Shinto traditions. While in Japan, I also found it easy to incorporate faith into my daily life, as public opportunities for worship are about as common as convenience stores. For example, it is very common to stop at roadside shrines for a quick prayer en route to work or on daily errands. Most people, adults and children alike, carry good luck charms (*omamori*) on their backpacks, briefcases or purses. Additionally, most interactions with nature are accompanied by small acts of worship, such as small shrines, bodhisattva statues called *jizo* often line hiking trails, and if you're lucky enough to catch sunrise, it is common to greet the sun with a bow and word of thanks for its return.

That winter, one of my closest friends from college was killed in a car accident. This event shook into view realities about which I had thus far had the luxury of skirting - questions about faith, mortality and existence that had previously crossed my mind, but could no longer be pushed to the corners of my thoughts. I longed for rituals to aid in my grieving process, and while in the U.S., death and dying remains a somewhat "hushed" topic and Americans love to restrict or downplay the grieving process, in Japan, the deceased are honored. Cemeteries are frequently visited and Japanese love to talk about and remember those who have gone before us. I still

remain fascinated by how people honor the legacies of those who have died, and my interest in bereavement work remains heavily influenced by my connection to and time in Japan.

In the fall of 2006 I returned to the U.S. and began my studies at Emory with grand intentions of working towards a PhD in the Hebrew Scriptures. For this reason, I was enrolled in the Master of Theological Studies program, as opposed to an M.Div. program. Though it did not take long for it to become quite clear that I did *not*, in fact, want a doctorate in biblical studies, I continued working towards my master's degree, and took time to explore other areas of studies. During this time I also very much struggled to find a faith home. After spending so much time exploring my faith and rituals outside the doors of the church while in Japan, I was unsure of how to continue this in the States. I found of plenty of places that tolerated various facets of my theology and faith, but nowhere that would nurture all of me. Perhaps a Methodist seminary in the south wasn't the best idea for a fairly progressive, and at this point, out woman, and I felt rejected and marginalized from so many angles by the church in general, and no longer felt at home in the Presbyterian tradition either. My struggles with various churches, including my seminary environment, were both theological and social in nature. As someone who was still working out many of the facets of my faith, the theological rigidity of many mainline denominations felt oppressive and suffocating. By the time I began seminary, I was identifying as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and that, along with other social views held by many churches (such as responses to poverty and other social injustices and complete silence in the field of activism), made me feel only partially valued. It seemed that my classmates cared only about neatly-packaged theology and flowery sermons, and our conversations almost never discussed social issues or speaking up for the silenced. For example, I joined the LGBTA seminary group (which included straight allies) in the hopes of finding a home there, only to once again feel

marginalized, as the group spent significant time and energy protecting the identities of the straight allies in the groups, in an attempt to preserve their quest for ordination in the Methodist Church. Given my disappointment with my classmates, I spent the remainder of seminary attending a Reconstructionist Synagogue and swore to myself that I would never associate with those who erect or maintain the walls of the church. Therefore, even as I discovered pastoral care and counseling, and eventually chaplaincy, I chose not to transfer to an M.Div. program, because I wanted nothing to do with ordination. I was deeply saddened by the hurt so many churches had handed me that I could not fathom trying to join the ranks of those who doled out the hurt.

As I continued my studies, I discovered the sanctity of pastoral care and counseling, and during my final semester, enrolled in a Clinical Pastoral Education internship at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta. During my internship, I experienced what I have come to understand as a "calling" - I had purpose and meaning that reached beyond myself, I enjoyed my work, and I had found a place where one of the world's great needs met one of my deep desires. Following graduation from seminary, I returned to Children's for a year-long residency (CPE), where I was able to continue growing into my role as a chaplain. I felt the most important work I could do was sit and be with people when no one else could or would. Bearing witness to, and validating, patient and family stories that lacked glory, splendor, and happy endings, became a cornerstone of my calling. Chaplaincy was also the first setting in which I didn't feel like I was being judged based on anything other than my skills or competence - it was outside of the rigidity of denominationalism. I was never I shooed away from a bedside because I wasn't good enough to be a Presbyterian or Methodist - I felt free to do the work to which I was called.

In late 2010 I returned to Chicago and continued my chaplaincy work, first at a suburban hospital, and eventually landing my dream of working at Children's Memorial Hospital, later

becoming Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago. As my chaplaincy skills developed, I felt under-trained in assessment and crisis intervention, so I began taking classes at Loyola University Chicago in the Institute for Pastoral Studies.

On March 11, 2011, my world was shaken again, when the Great East Japan Earthquake, and subsequent tsunami, devastated much of the northeastern coast of Japan. I ached to do something to help the country and people whom I love dearly, so in June, I once again boarded a plane bound for Tokyo, with nothing more than a duffel and backpack. However, instead of ending my journey there, I continued on for another 12 hours to the small fishing city of Ofunato. For the better part of that summer, I slept on the floor of an evacuation shelter and aided in relief efforts on the coast. Given the spiritual and emotional work I was doing at home, the physical work I assumed I would be doing in Japan sounded like a nice change of pace. However, it wasn't long before it became clear that 'witness' would once again, be one of my most important tasks. My light skin and reddish hair stuck out like a sore thumb in the rural Japanese town, as did a few of my foreign volunteer friends. Whether we were working on sites, or just out in the community, town members always wanted to share stories - stories of their town before the devastation, stories of their families, stories of their local festivals, and stories of what they were doing when the tsunami hit. While I did find myself waist-deep in mud, debris or rotting fish on a daily basis, I spent far more energy bearing witness to the lives - the devastation *and* the hope - of the people of Tohoku (the region). The practice of witnessing and validating people's stories – and making sure their lives were not forgotten – this became the most important thing I could do.

After returning to the U.S., I continued working as a chaplain, and on courses at Loyola, which eventually became a degree in pastoral counseling. Since completion of that degree, I have

continued to work as a chaplain in addition to my newer role as a therapist. At first I wore both “hats” on a part-time basis, and found my ‘spiritual’ and ‘secular’ professions balanced each other well. Three years ago, I took a full-time therapy position, and while I worried a bit about losing time in my chaplaincy role, I found that my work was no less a ministry. What continues to feel like my most urgent task is to bear witness to the stories of those whom society tends to forget – those whose stories lack the glory of successful careers or relationships and wrestle daily with demons of mental illness, addiction and/or poverty. These are the stories that our culture refuses to lift up, and often tries to sweep under the rug completely. My job is to witness and validate those stories, and help advocate for them when their voices become weak.

In my ongoing search for a church home, spanning more than a decade since I moved back from Japan in ‘06, I have tried a Reconstructionist Synagogue, a Unitarian Universalist congregation, a coffee shop church, several Presbyterian churches, two American Baptist churches and even an online church. Eventually my “church shopping” took me to First Congregational Church of Evanston, which became ‘home’ almost immediately. In addition to Ann (Rosewall) and the church’s warm and genuine welcome, I found the church able to cater to my need for liturgical experience (pipe organ, strong choir, grand sanctuary, wooden pews) as well as progressive and challenging worship and work. I love that I can be swallowed by the sounds of the pipe organ and hear words of prophecy that are not complacent where we are, but rather where we could go; that we can share cookies at coffee hour and laugh until our stomachs hurt, while not denying life’s harsher realities by opening our doors to Family Promise (a homelessness-fighting non-profit housed in our church building); and that *all* are invited to the Table, and that we can commune together, as one body.

Before I continue to explain why and how I have found the UCC to be home, let me provide some theological context to my journey. For many years I attended a church that recited the Apostle's Creed during every service. While I appreciate that the UCC is not a creedal tradition, many lines of the Apostle's Creed still ring pleasantly in my ears - much of that is in large part due to the communal ritual and embodied experience of reciting it on a regular basis with my brothers and sisters in worship. The first line of the Creed remains the cornerstone of my faith: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." I do believe in an all-powerful spirit and force beyond all human capacity of understanding, and I prefer to call it God. The God that I believe in is nearly impossible to explain, because our finite language cannot possibly describe an infinite being. When we define words, we put limits on them and their meaning - this is how we can understand the difference between "table" and "chair." However, my God is beyond those limits of definition. God is not male *or* female, rather God is male *and* female. It is not that God is neither black nor white, God is black *and* white, as well as brown and all other skin colors. I do often anthropomorphize God to help me better understand or relate, though I do believe God to be able to take any and all forms of being *and* non-being.

God is ever-present, all-knowing, all-powerful and all-loving. I spent most of my teen years feeling very isolated, and I found great comfort in knowing something out there loved me and cared about me, even when I wasn't sure how or where to find it in my reality. During that time I was not an avid churchgoer, or devout in my youth group attendance or activities, though the steadfastness of God's love for, and patience with me was perhaps the one thread of hope that sustained me. I struggled immensely with issues of self-worth and truly believed I was no-good as a human, yet somehow knew there was a God out there who felt differently. I hung on verses

like Romans 8:38-39, trusting that nothing could separate me from the love of God, no matter what I did or how broken I was.

I came to understand ‘sin’ as any action that seeks to disrupt one’s relationship with God. I think this is most often visible in poor treatment of any human, animal or other part of creation. Any action that does not fully acknowledge the value of another is sinful in nature. If God loves God creation so fully and completely, then any action on our part that does not fully validate or respect that love distances ourselves from more complete and wholesome relationship with God. I recently heard someone describe the “root of all evil” as “hierarchy,” and I think that fits with my understanding of sin. Any action, thought or structure that places differing values on humans, animals or any part of creation is inherently opposed to God’s repeated messages to love and care for all.

God came to earth in fully human and fully divine form to teach humanity what it means to live like God in human form (“And the Word became flesh and lived among us” the Gospel of John shares [John 1:14]). The God that I worship is so beyond any comprehension that it does become daunting to try and understand what it might mean to live in God’s image. God so loves humanity that God sent God’s self to Earth in human form to help us ‘get it.’ If God is beyond comprehension by our finite brains, how can we understand how to live in a God-like way? Thus God came to earth in God’s fully divine form, and also in fully human form, to help us mortals understand how to live as people of God. Jesus retained God’s incomprehensibility, yet was also clothed in flesh and blood, and spoke using words, as well as slept and walked and cried and breathed, and these are all things I can understand, and even relate.

Just as God sent God’s self to help us mere mortals more fully understand God’s love and God’s commandments to love others, we have also been given rituals to enhance our experiences,

and even to remind us when our bodies may forget. I define ritual as the sensory experience of worship. I do consider myself to be fairly “liturgically conservative,” in the sense that I love older church ritual. While I do recognize the power of the Spirit to show up anywhere anytime, I very much enjoy worshiping with a large pipe organ, a strong choir, sing familiar tunes like the doxology, sit in old wooden pews, and soak in the hallowed walls of a grand sanctuary.

I very regularly teach clients and groups about the parts of the brain, especially the fact that our five senses are processed and stored in different parts of the brain. This is why sensory input can trigger different memories depending on the sense stimulated. For example, have you ever caught a smell and immediately remembered something you had not thought of in years? Or heard a song or tasted a particular food that transported you back to another time and place? This is because touch, taste, sight, sound, and smell are all processed and stored in different parts of our brains, and activating one of these senses may activate a memory that may not be present in one’s consciousness. This is helpful in explaining how symptoms of mental illness manifest, and especially beneficial in working through trauma history, particularly how and where traumatic experiences are stored in the brain and body. The reason I mention this here has everything to do with fully experiencing worship. When I read a book or contemplate a topic, I’m spending time solely in my pre-frontal cortex, the part of the brain that is responsible for complex thinking and executive functioning – what I call “the land of logic and reason.” However, there is significantly more brain that isn’t being used if I dwell only there. And this is where ritual comes into play – old and established, as well as newly-created.

I have had periods in my life where my Christian worship has been limited to reading sermons online, which is vastly different from the lived experience. When I can not only hear the pipe organ, but feel the vibrations of those bass notes; smell the lilies on Easter Sunday; feel the

handshakes and hugs at the passing of the peace; feel the sturdiness of wooden pew benches; taste the combination of grain and grape dissolving in my mouth, that is when my body fully knows that I am at worship. Rituals have been given to us so that our bodies can fully know God's love and presence. I have heard many say, and I too have experienced, being in a rough patch, and perhaps being distracted, and then attending a worship service and feeling overwhelming comfort. This can happen even when we are confused or can't make sense of events in our lives, yet the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touch of worship reminds our bodies that we are in a safe place.

We have been given two rituals in particular that have been set aside as especially sacred: Baptism and Communion. Baptism is intentionally choosing to live life in Jesus's ways. It does not mean you have figured it out, rather it is the beginning of the conversation. Baptism is a covenant between an individual (and/or the individual's family) and the church, and it is open to all people from all walks of life. In addition to being the point at which one makes the choice to make his or her life theological, what makes it sacramental is that everyone is welcome to join the fold, Jew or Greek, male or female (Galatians 3:28), *all* are welcome. Baptism is a choice – while God will love you with or without it, the covenant between you and the church, as well as the choice to live theologically is an intentional decision. Baptism is also communal. It is, whenever possible, not done in private, and becomes part of the stories of many lived, not just the baptized individual. Baptism, like I mentioned above, is also sensory. It is experienced not just in the “land of logic and reason,” but also by touch. While Baptism only happens once in a lifetime, I do want to mention the ritual of the renewal of Baptismal vows. I find it helpful to remember vows that were made some time ago, and for some, by someone else on their behalf. In addition, this ritual can be impactful when paired with a sensory component. While I do not recall my own baptism (I was only a few weeks old), I very clearly remember dipping my own hand in the

baptismal font in Cannon Chapel, as well as the time I received an anointing with water in another renewal ritual at a different church.

On the night before Jesus died, he gave us a new ritual that would bring together his followers from far and wide. When he shared the bread and cup, he charged us to make sacred the everyday tasks of eating and drinking. This charge is not only to consume bread and wine for the sake of our own physical nourishment, but to gather at the Table with brothers and sisters in Christ. My understanding of the Sacrament of Communion has everything to do with being the Body of the Church - the Body of Christ. In addition to those with whom we physically commune, we also do so knowing the larger church is partaking of the exact same Table around the world. Like Baptism and other rituals, Communion is intentionally physical and sensory. The physical feelings of holding, chewing and drinking, often accompanied by the smell of grain and grape, as well as taste, help our bodies more fully experience that which logic alone cannot completely understand. (If you are interested in hearing more, please feel free to reach out. I can talk about neuro-psychology until I'm blue in the face)

I spent most of my later teens and twenties not taking Communion – not as a boycott, but because I did not feel welcome at the Table. I listened carefully to the words of invitation – regardless of what church I was attending – and far more often than not, I did not feel like someone with whom that church wanted to be at Table. Even at churches where I was not explicitly told I wasn't welcome, it remained clear they did not wish to share their table with me (note: this ranged from theological to social differences at various churches). I believe in an Open Table, and by open, I mean absolutely anyone. If Jesus were here today, I do not believe he would refuse any person in the world a seat at His Table.

Aside from the simple tasks of consuming bread and wine, what makes Communion sacramental is the act of radical inclusion, of bringing together the body of the Church. Jesus calls us to this “in remembrance of me,” meaning the most important parts are not bread and wine, but re-membering the body of Christ - not just recalling stories or events, but actually bringing the parts of His body together. I am reminded here of the Greek word “Ekklesia,” to be called out from where one is, to assemble and worship. Thus, the sacred act of extending God’s love to the marginalized, cast-out, silenced or ignored, that is Christ’s work. My work in the field of mental health is not just about sitting with those whom society has marginalized, but those who may even feel cast aside or forgotten by God. As Matthew tells us, “Truly I tell you. Just as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40). And reminding those same people that they cannot be cast out from this love, that is gathering in, re-membering, the body of Christ. This is sacred work. This is Communion.

As I decided to join First Congregational Church, I began to learn more about the United Church of Christ as a denomination. On the UCC website, under the tab titled “What We Believe” is the Statement of Faith. While I relate to its contents, and particularly love the wording in the doxology version, I also ran into a problem: if the UCC is a non-creedal tradition, then what exactly is the Statement of Faith and what purpose does it serve? As I pondered this, I thought back on my faith formation and the role other statements of faith, as well as even a few church mission statements, played in my journey. Eventually, I came to see the UCC Statement of Faith as a useful tool, handy in a variety of usages. First of all, it is a great starting point – a launchpad of sorts, from which newcomers to the denomination can learn, as well as Sunday School students and confirmation classes. I thought about my faith formation and times when I knew I believed something, but lacked words for it, I was able to find verbiage in faith statements

around me. Additionally, these statements helped me explore my beliefs further – questioning or confirming the words of someone else was often easier than finding my own. The contexts in which I currently work, both as a therapist and as a chaplain, are both places where many are often at a loss for words, thus the availability of a faith statement continues to be an asset in my mind. I do also appreciate the non-creedal nature of the denomination, as I feel it is more inclusive and allows our doors to be open to *everyone*.

Over the course of my faith journey, three sermons have been especially pivotal in developing my theology. As I heard these sermons (and in one case, read), my understanding for and of topics over which I had been struggling gained substantial clarity. While each of these three preachers is amazingly eloquent and wonderfully accomplished, the reason I bring them here is because of where they were able to lead my faith. I will admit that I do struggle with the concept of substitutionary atonement - the notion that simply because Jesus died, I am automatically saved – and this has left me, especially when I was younger, troubled and confused during the Easter season. During Lent of my senior year in college, I finally mustered up the courage to share my theological struggles about Jesus and what Easter was supposed to mean to with me a staff member of Williamsburg Presbyterian Church. He immediately recommended I read, and subsequently sent me a copy of, a sermon titled “Empty Tomb, Opening Doors,” by Rev. Dr. Robert Dunham, originally preached at University Presbyterian Church in Chapel Hill, NC on Easter Sunday of 2002. This sermon highlights the drastic changes in understanding the resurrection generated. When Jesus rose from the dead, God challenged all that Jesus’ followers – and subsequently us – knew about, well, basically everything. I had nicknamed this sermon “Jesus is the Hulk,” as I had an image of Jesus busting out of the tomb, casting the stone aside as if it were a small toy, and changing reality as we knew it. For every person who said “this can’t

be done” Jesus said, “wanna bet?!” I recently heard someone refer to Jesus as “the ultimate badass,” and I’d have to agree. He didn’t just hang out with prostitutes, he dined with them; he didn’t just pick a Samaritan, he picked a woman; and with the resurrection he sealed the message that we mortals do not understand the breadth of his ministry and work. After years of struggling with the Easter story, I was finally able to identify it as God saying, “humans, you don’t get to choose the end of the story.” In the story of the Resurrection, God turns what we know and understand on its head.

My second transformational sermon I was lucky enough to experience in person. It was originally preached as a candidacy sermon by one of my theological heroes, Rev. Dr. Christine Chakoian, at First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest, IL (June 12, 2005). After a few years of driving an hour to visit her church when I was home from college for breaks and summers, she received a call to the church my family had been attending for almost two decades. She preached her candidacy sermon, titled “Hope Does Not Disappoint Us” mere days before I left for Japan on a one-way ticket. The crux of this sermon was in what I would call Hope with a capital “H.” Chris differentiated between colloquial uses of “hope” – as in “I hope the Cubs win” or “I hope to get into a good school” – and the kind of Hope that has no logical chance of happening, but is not too great for God. Chris argues that “The difference between hope and optimism is simply this: optimism plays the cards in a known a limited deck. Hope believes there are still more cards to be dealt... cards that we have not yet seen.” Just as Bob Dunham’s sermon led me to believe in the impossibility of Jesus’ work, in this one, Chris called me to lean into the possibility that God could do something with a situation that I could not imagine. Needless to say, I left for Japan with copies of this sermon in my bag. This sermon also became immensely informative to me as I grew into my role as a chaplain and began focusing in the field of death, dying and bereavement.

It took nearly a decade to be “wow”ed in quite the same way again, and when I was, it took a minute to realize what had happened. My third transformational sermon was preached by Rev. Dr. Ann Rosewall, at First Congregational Church of Evanston, UCC, in April of 2015. Based on the story of Peter and Cornelius, she began the message by repeating the line “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 10:15). My initial reaction was to mentally pat myself on the back, as I heard the words as an affirmation for the work I was doing at the time (I was working with youths who were wards of the state – kids who had been rejected by multiple foster families, as well as their own). I remember getting comfortable in my pew, and on my high horse, to hear the remainder of the message. Ann went on to talk about Peter, and the more she continued, the more I was reminded of how much he is someone with whom I identify – doubting, questioning, eager, yet unsure. Throughout the sermon, she kept repeating the aforementioned command from God. By what felt like the 900th iteration (though it was probably only the third or fourth), I felt like standing up and yelling “oh fine, I hear you!” in a somewhat petulant, and mildly tantrum-like manner. In that moment I realized that the message was not about what I was doing well, but about that from which I was still running. After years of feeling like a second-class-citizen within the church – whether it be as a female, theologically questioning or queer – I still was not entirely convinced of this whole ‘ordination’ thing. It was as if Ann repeated that line until I heard it. God said to Peter, and to me, “you do not get to pick what is sacred and what is profane, only I do.” Just as Bob Dunham opened my eyes to the idea that the resurrection shattered all of our expectations and understandings of how life works; and as Chris helped me understand the importance of leaning into a kind of Hope that makes sense only to the faithful; Ann called out to me to cut the B.S. that I might have any say about who might be “in” or “out” of any club (including the ranks of authorized ministry). In addition to it becoming clear that day

that I did wish to actively pursue ordination, this message has remained paramount in my work of service and ministry. As I sit with those on the margins of society, I must constantly remember that I do not get to pick who is to be called profane or clean. In the words of Thomas Merton, “our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy.”

During my UCC History and Polity course, I learned more about the four Covenanted Ministries, and I found myself drawn to Justice and Witness. That June, at the Illinois Conference Celebration, I attended a plenary session with Traci Blackmon, and when she asked what we thought “Justice and Witness Ministries” meant, I blurted out “the continued work of Jesus in an imperfect world.” She singled me out and asked to discuss that further. That evening, sitting on a bench near the edge of the Illinois River, she shared more about her work leading Justice and Witness (she was interim Executive Minister at the time), and that was when I knew for sure my work was (is) a ministry. I had already begun MID process, though did still struggle with articulating exactly how my work in the secular world was a ministry. While I had felt drawn to the UCC in large part due to its emphasis on the fight for social justice and bearing witness to inequality, I had yet to integrate that into my daily work. In addition to witnessing the struggles of those with mental illness, I was finally able to recognize my work against mental health stigma and advocating for clients and families as parts of my ministry as well.

In addition to those I have already mentioned, there are so many others - a great cloud of witnesses, if you will - who have helped inform my theology and understanding of my own faith. While there are too many to possibly name, in the interest of helping others better understand me and my faith, I will mention a few. The very first place I learned about unconditional love - the kind I imagine God gives - was from my grandparents. My paternal grandparents have been a very constant presence in my life, and I learned at a very young age that

their love for me was something about which I could do nothing. No matter if I got in trouble, or if I questioned my worth, it was abundantly clear that they would still love me fiercely. I have no doubt that their examples helped to shape the understanding of God I have today.

In addition, others who have strongly influenced my journey include pastors like Patrick Willson, Christine Chakoian and Ann Rosewall; academic minds with whom I've had the privilege of studying like Luke Timothy Johnson, Pamela Cooper-White (especially her work on religion and psychology) and Don Saliers; a wonderful CPE supervisor, who we fondly called "Boss"; and more recently role models in the field of clinical psychotherapy. There have also been other voices that have influenced me along the way through their writings. This includes the minds of Barbara Brown Taylor (*Leaving Church* and especially *An Altar in the World*), John Swinton (whose books *Raging with Compassion* and *Resurrecting the Person* were influential in getting me into the care and counseling field), Nicholas Wolterstorff (*Lament for a Son* greatly informed my work in bereavement), Lauren Winner (*Girl Meets God* was formative for me as a young woman searching for clarity in my faith), Henri Nouwen (*The Wounded Healer* and *The Return of the Prodigal Son*), C.S. Lewis (*Mere Christianity* and *A Grief Observed*), Anne Lamot (and her brutally honest approaches to faith and life in *Traveling Mercies* and *Plan B*), Stanley Hauerwas (and his work on theology and disability) and more recently Nadia Bolz-Weber and Diana Butler Bass.

In finding the UCC, I not only found a spiritual home, but I also found an organization of which I desire to be a part, as well as represent. I remember one Saturday last summer, I was riding motorcycles with some friends, and as we chatted over lunch I mentioned I was looking forward to church the next day. One friend immediately responded with something like "if I ever stepped foot in a church, it would burst into flames." I calmly told her that my church is cool and

she might like it. She said “no seriously, churches don’t like me.” My heart sank for this friend. I’ve been there - thinking that no church wanted me. I was proud to tell her, with 100% certainty, that she would be welcome at my church - gay or straight, saint or sinner - she can come anytime. Think of how much more powerful that statement would be, coming from an officially-recognized, ordained clergy member. I want to tell people just like me - especially as I was - who are ready to give up on the church, that you are welcome, and *loved*, here. That the United Church of Christ does not tolerate bigotry, sexism, abuse, racism, or any other hatred or judgement. That you can ride your motorcycle with a rowdy crew on Saturday, and still be welcomed at church on Sunday; that you can struggle with reality contact and other mental health issues, and there is a place for you in our congregation; that you can struggle with abuse and marginalization, and this church will hear you, and bear witness to your pain; that you can question or doubt, and you are still welcome at our Table.

Given that my employment is not contingent upon being ordained, I am often asked why I am even pursuing this. As a veteran clergy friend of mine recently said, “ordination is about vocation, not occupation.” And as I look at the work that I do on a daily basis - be it mental health, chaplaincy, relief work, fostering rescue dogs, or even chatting with motorcycle friends - I have found it my calling to *share* the Good News, to *support* the weak and struggling, and to invite *everyone* to Christ’s Table. The opening sentences of the UCC’s Ordained Minister’s Code speak so clearly to my life, that perhaps it is time to pursue them. It opens by saying the “whole Church” is called, and continues on to identify that some are called to “preach and teach the gospel,” “administer the sacraments,” and “administer pastoral care.” I do feel called out to do these things, and as I have mentioned in the preceding pages, believe I am doing this work in both the fields of mental health and chaplaincy.

In the spirit of Covenant, which is paramount in the UCC, as an ordained minister, the church will not only promise to support me, I too will make promises to the church. I promise to nurture and help bring forth gifts of the church and its members; I will stand by and support my colleagues; I will support those who risk recourse in defending their faith; I will maintain involvement with my local church, as well as larger UCC structure; and I promise to be a responsible representative of the Church, to the best of my ability. In addition to gaining colleagues in the field of ministry, I will also have an additional code of ethics, as well as resources like the Conference Minister and association committees, to consult in times of decision-making, and I pledge to use these resources as needed. I will also strive to honor boundaries that promote my self-care, and ask for help from my friends, family and colleagues when I struggle with this. It seems only fitting to close this paragraph with the closing line of the Ordained Minister's Code: "Relying on the grace of God, I will lead a life worthy of the calling to which I have been called."

In addition to wanting to serve God, others and the church, I also crave colleagues in ministry. The majority of my current work is in the field of mental health, where I do not have any colleagues who are intentionally engaged in ministry, and it is a bit lonely. Additionally, while the church can often wear their pastors out, there are intentional structures in place to promote clergy self-care and provide support, and I look forward to having these resources in my toolbox as well.

I do believe that the church, not just the UCC, but the church universal, is at a crossroads - fewer people are filling the pews, yet the need for the church's mission could not be stronger. Technically, my current 'call' falls under the UCC category of "specialized ministry" (as in, not parish ministry). However, the term 'specialized' sounds like a specific or narrow

calling, and I feel that my ministry is exactly the opposite - without being restricted to an actual pulpit, I can preach and teach and commune in the name of God, whenever and wherever I am. Jesus did very little work within the walls of an official religious building, so my interest in, and request to do, work *outside* of the walls of the church, feels even more Christ-like. Despite fewer people coming into sanctuaries on Sunday mornings, the role of and the *need for* the church is no less urgent. Then it's time that we meet the members of our church universal where they are. And do the most Christ-like thing I can think of: tell them that they are loved, and they are welcome, no matter who they are, what they wear, or where they are on life's journey.

While I have spent much of the last 20 pages urging the church to consider my work as a therapist at a secular agency as a ministry, I feel it is also worth mentioning that I have received a new call and will begin a new job on December 3rd of this year. I will be continuing my work as a therapist, though my new employer, Samaritan Counseling Center, is a 'validated ministry' of the PC(USA). While my new job is considerably more 'faith-based' and this paper could have been a lot easier had I simply presented this earlier, however, I shaped it as I did because want to underscore how much I wholeheartedly believe that work in the field of mental health is a ministry.

As I have mentioned already, I absolutely love the UCC's dedication to Justice & Witness - being completely unwilling to stand silent in the face of injustice or unfairness. The UCC has been there, firmly holding ground in the fights for Civil Rights, Human Rights, LGBTQ+ issues, equality for women, opposing domestic violence, fighting for those without enough to eat, shouting on behalf of Mother Earth, and many more. I feel that one of the extremely marginalized groups, for whom the UCC needs to stand, falls in the field of mental health. Perhaps it is safe to say that those with severe and persistent mental illness are the lepers

of our time. This is also tied closely with social justice, as the number of people who experience chronic and significantly debilitating mental illnesses are staggeringly high in the lower socioeconomic status categories. This is a population with whom few will sit, and for whom few will speak. The work of Jesus is to speak up for those who have no voice; and to sit with those, whom others at the time would not dare. Jesus not only tolerated those whom society cast out, he actually sat with them, dined with them, and healed them.

The Gospel of John wastes no time in telling us that Jesus is the Word. And if Jesus is the Word - the Word made flesh, to be exact - then anytime we tell the story of Jesus, we are sharing of the Word. In addition, anytime we do the work of Jesus, we are preaching and teaching the gospels with our actions. Therefore, when we speak out against depression, when we give voice to the silenced - whether it is by mental illness or by society - THIS is the work of Jesus. My work in the field of mental health is not just about sitting with those whom society has deemed as lepers, but those who may even feel cast aside or forgotten by God. To re-member Christ is to put Him into our midst, this re-membering is a holy sacrament.

My ordination would not just mean the world to me - as a capstone to a decade+ of theological work - but also as a sign that the UCC considers work in the field of mental health as a ministry. It will send the message to those who have felt cast out, saying "we have not forgotten you. You too are be re-membered into the Body of Christ. You too are members of our Church." God is still speaking, and it is up to the Church to reach outside of its doors and meet the remainder of Christ's body where it is.

As someone who has experienced abuse and hurt, and who, like many others, assumed my church was a safe place to share my pain, only to be invalidated and turned away by an ill-prepared member of the clergy (not UCC), I ache to do everything I can to ensure that no one

experiences anything like that again. I want to make sure – to the best of my ability – that any person who has struggled with mental illness, trauma, abuse, assault, marginalization, or any other form of devaluation, can know “I hear you,” “I see you,” “I believe you,” and “this church cares.” And I do believe the UCC at large does care about these populations (I know this to be true in the work of Justice and Witness Ministries), which was the pivot-point of my 180 – my turn from wanting nothing to do with the church to wanting to help shape its future.

As I mentioned earlier, the moment God rolled stone away from the entrance of the tomb, absolutely everything changed. We can’t go back to ‘pre-Easter’ time - comfortable as it may have been. No, we are “Easter People,” we live in a time where even death does not have the last word. *God is still speaking*

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