

ORDINATION PAPER

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In Beginning: A Theological Basis of Call to Ministry

To talk about the United Church of Christ, and my call to ministry in the United Church of Christ, I have to start at beginning. Not “the” beginning, either with the Creation story in Genesis, Psalm 104, John 1, or the book of Job, nor “a” beginning,” such as 1957, when Christian movements joined together to start what is now our denomination,¹ but rather with *beginning* itself, or the ability to participate in newness and the ability to move within the love of the world.

Beginning is a guiding metaphor familiar to us in churches today, although these days it may be difficult to embrace. We understandably turn toward endings, as congregations dwindle and churches die, and anxieties about the continuing ability to do mission and faithful activism plague hearts. We focus on endings as we fear and despair for members, clergy, and those among us who are literally threatened with physical and/or social death, either through the brutality of state-sanctioned violence, or through mass indifference to the systemic sins of economic greed, racism, transphobia and homophobia, and misogyny.

However, the promise of our God is that there is newness that orients us *toward* the world rather than away from it. *Beginning* denies death of its power and sting because our dreams, visions and hopes are planted within the covenant of life that we make with God and one another, and live out every time we meet together and share the sacraments of bread and wine with one another. *Beginning* does not mean that we glory in a pure tradition of the past or are beholden only to historic interpretations of scripture or polity. Rather, *beginning* means we look to those who came before us and the work they have done in order to see how we are faring with them on our journey, while our work *begins* anew in the present. *Beginning* does not nullify what

¹ Randi Walker, in her book *The Evolution of a UCC Style: Essays in the History, Ecclesiology, and Culture of the United Church of Christ* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 2005), problematizes the historical “four-origin” creation story of the UCC by setting our four movements – Congregational, Christian, Evangelical, and Reform – within the multiple and overlapping streams of world religions. This new contextualization disrupts the mythos of a pure and Eurocentric beginning of both our denomination and its major movements.

has come before but re-members, realizes, and renews it. This is what Isaiah meant when he told the people that God is doing a new thing, making a new way in the wilderness and highways in the desert (Isaiah 43:19): Because God's covenant with us lasts forever, newness doesn't cancel what was, but infuses what was with what is and what is to come.

This invitation to *beginning* has been the lamp that has guided my way to the UCC and through my call to ministry in the UCC. The UCC is a denomination of *beginning* because its history and polity, worship and activism, priestly proclamation and protest, have repeatedly demonstrated a grounding in the traditions of our Protestant faiths, and an openness to the Spirit that calls us into challenging places. When our National Setting declared that God is still speaking, it showed our commitment to this orientation toward newness of our life together in the world. God's relevance and the message of God's good news aren't locked in the past but still thrive today. However, *beginning* isn't just an orientation, but also encompasses the ability to act. Our denomination's national slogan reminds us to *be* the church by *acting* in ways that challenge the mainstream perception of what church is. To protect the environment, to reject racism, to fight for the poor, and engage in the solidarities our churches and offices have made, *act* in the world in response to the promise of God's forgiveness that assures us that we are God's; we act when we reject the wisdom of the powers and principalities and instead defy the world by insisting on a new way, God's way, of being community. *Beginning* requires forgiveness, because we cannot act until we are free to move. In a world where powers and principalities limit our ability to move and breathe freely, we turn to God and the covenant we have made with God and one another that a world of justice and liberation is at hand.

This theological perspective of *beginning* that has helped me reflect on my call to ministry has been influenced by the writings of Hannah Arendt. Arendt's writings on totalitarianism,

hope, forgiveness and beginning, have been taken up within the field of political theology, in which I am an academic scholar, and have helped me critically address in my preaching and teaching issues such as human suffering, migration, and the politics of justice. Although it is not typical to call a Jewish political theorist a theologian, her reliance on the writings of the Christian theologian Augustine “carries forward certain core Augustinian commitments²,” that make her a “modern representative of the Augustinian tradition on evil.”³ Augustine especially influenced Arendt’s thinking on the concept of *beginning*, or natality, as she termed it. Rejecting the focus on mortality and death that was popular in the philosophy of her day, Arendt drew from Augustine in order to emphasize the incomplete, imperfect, forever-shifting and love-oriented vision of human belonging that comes in being able to *act* toward something new, which is the hallmark of the creative power of beginning. According to Arendt — and Augustine — human beings *are* beginning, and as a result are called to always move forward into newness, to *act* in the world even when and especially when we don’t know what the outcome will be. According to Augustine, God’s promise of love can be summed up in the words *Amo: Volo ut sis* (“I love you, I will you to be”), which Arendt interprets as a promise and imperative to act as part of our identity as human beings who are free to act into new things.

My journey in the UCC has been one that has compelled me to journey into newness leading me to places I never thought I would go, and to a freedom within love *from* God and *for* God that I never knew before. While Arendt’s vision of beginning and forgiveness and has been criticized for what appears to be a form of “cheap grace,” because she insists on forgiveness as a foregone conclusion, I interpret her explanation as a dim mirror through which to read the scriptures and to reflect upon their prophetic and pastoral message. By insisting on a God of love who has never

² John Kleis, *Hannah Arendt and Theology* (London and New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 4.

³ Kleis, *Hannah Arendt and Theology*, 3.

stopped speaking but speaks anew, again and again, and who calls us to act as the church, the UCC is one of many movements seeking to counter “cheap grace” by proclaiming a world in which we act out of our forgiven-ness, in ways that offer hope and meaning in a world caught up in systems of oppression, injustice, and sin. Understanding the call of the UCC as *beginning* helps me interpret forgive-ness as I have found it in the UCC, as an enactment of holy covenant that frees God’s people to act against the powers and principalities that seek to lead the world into meaninglessness and death.

A Call in the Wilderness

My own call to the UCC and Christian ministry was such a beginning, and has freed me to act within covenant in ways I never imagined I would. God called me from a hilltop overlooking a *colonia* in Nogáles, México. I had come to México to participate in a Borderlinks immersion course through my seminary, to learn more about the US economic and immigration policies that had transformed both life and death on the México/US border, and to witness to the myriad ways churches along that frontier were working to provide comfort and challenge in this place. On that hilltop I began to hear a single line of scripture repeating in my head: “A voice cries out in the wilderness: Make straight a highway in the desert for our God” (Isaiah 40:3; Mark 1:3).

At the time I could not identify what this deep and powerful undercurrent that was reordering the contours of my safe and sensible world. I had come to seminary to pursue a strictly academic degree, a master of theological studies degree that I hoped would lead to a doctorate in religious studies. I had never made connections between what I had considered the otherworldliness of the Bible and the real world, but on that hilltop the words of the Bible shifted into the living Word of scripture. And I had never made the connection between my mother’s immigration story, the story of migration that I was seeing now, and the story of Exodus, exile, and aliens in the Bible. I

had never seen a church that made the justice of heaven and justice on earth a united dream. But on that hilltop, I began to see a glimpse of something more.

After we returned from the trip, I did something I had never done before: I attended a candlelight vigil to protest a law that had been proposed in the Oklahoma state legislature to criminalize undocumented persons and any person who gave them comfort or aid. I went and prayed with hundreds of other people in my city that the hardened hearts of our lawmakers might be softened, and that we all might find the courage to live by the biblical tenet to welcome all strangers into our midst, that we might be entertaining angels without knowing it. I started looking for ways to be a part of the change I wanted to see in my world, beginning by becoming more involved at my church's feeding ministry and Bible study. I changed my degree from an academic track to a master of divinity degree, and began the process of discerning what I now know was a call from God to ministry.

I initially doubted this call at every turn; after all, I was a lapsed Catholic who had more or less gone "spiritual-but-not-religious" and was suspicious of mainstream religious motivations, which in my state had been deeply intertwined with fundamentalist Christian politics. The church I had been raised in was an old German Catholic church that reluctantly accepted the changes of Vatican II, and I remember being frustrated from a young age at the separation between church and world that was preached from our pulpit. I largely left the Catholic faith shortly after I was confirmed at 18, but over the next 10 years I repeatedly tried to find a church home because I felt like something was missing in my life. However, the same issues that prompted me to leave my home church caused me to drop out of whatever church, Protestant and Catholic, that I attempted to attend: The disconnection between church and world that made an abstract, disembodied faith

the priority over and against any faithful participation in the world; and an insidious insistence on the supremacy of men in all things, particularly spiritual matters.

My search for a permanent church home came up again when I decided to apply to seminary. Unlike most people, who enter seminary through their church, I did it the other way around: Deciding to study religion at seminary, I saw from the application that I needed a reference from my church minister, so I set about to find one. I came to the UCC through the “bouncer” ad of the early 2000s that showed churches denying access to worshippers who were queer, wheelchair-bound, nonwhite, or “different” in some other way. I was intrigued by this ad that promised that “wherever you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here,” especially after I discovered that the columnist in the local progressive alternative newspaper, whose articles I admired for the bold challenge they levied against the injustices committed by those in power, was the pastor at Mayflower Congregational Church UCC, in Oklahoma City. I joined the church shortly after my first visit and found myself regularly comforted and challenged by the message preached from the pulpit and from the visible work the church members did to put their faith into action. For the first time since I was a child, church became a deep part of my life.

Soon after joining the church, I began talking to the ministerial staff about how to participate more in the life of the church, and soon I was leading Sunday school classes and serving on committees. Eventually I was asked to take a summer internship at a community that our church had planted in a suburb nearby, becoming a worship leader, teacher, and regular preacher. It was at this small church, United Church of Norman, UCC, that the ineffable feeling from the hilltop in México coalesced into something concrete: A call to ministry. It wasn’t enough just to study religion and hold myself objectively apart from it, and it wasn’t enough to participate in actions and political campaigns without the divine nourishment that scripture, worship, and

congregational support was giving me. To my surprise, rather than saying “no” as I normally would when offered to do something that was outside of my imagination, I repeatedly began to say yes whenever I was asked to act as a church leader and to share my gifts and leadership in response to this call from a congregation and from God.

I struggled then and still struggle with what this call means, especially when acknowledging the evils that our churches have done in the name of God. Even the UCC, a justice-forward denomination of firsts, is not exempt from participating in these institutional, systemic sins, such as aiding in the colonization and destruction of the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Islands. But there is a phrase from my studies that arises when I think of this call and all its promises of hope and all its legacies of destruction: The Postcolonial Imperative, which states that one can’t *not* be involved in the very problematic and often deadly structures that rule over our world. What this imperative means for me is a call to *not* turn away from a problematic institution in search of a new, pure start, but instead to keep beginning anew within the circle of forgiveness that church has always striven for, learning from past errors, reflecting upon historic shames, and acting with one another toward the enactment of our shared vision of the kingdom of God.

This imperative has kept me in relationship in church, even when my frustrations and my academic studies have tempted me to pull away. And so I have stayed in church and slowly worked to develop gifts and graces that seemed to fit in the work of the different communities of Christ with whom I have been in relationship: the national Local Church Ministries board of the UCC, where I served one year as a representative for the Kansas-Oklahoma Conference; Wellington Avenue UCC, where I am a member-in-discernment and worked as lay leader, educator, preacher, social media minister, and teacher; at First Congregational Church of Waukegan, where I was a regular supply preacher; the CMA Council, where I served one term as

an at-large member for Cluster 2; and for the past year at First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Bremerton, Washington, where I have worked as a lay leader to help revitalize the education and worship ministries.

Most importantly, this call to ministry has changed the way I do my scholarship. It has become very common in the academy to detach theology from its institutional moorings, and to look with suspicion at theologians who are committed to a church or faith community. While academic scholarship has helped bring new and exciting illuminations to my study of God-talk, I find myself aggravated by the abstract incommensurability of their reflections. Often much academic theology is so divorced from a community's experience that theology has well-deserved its reputation for being unnecessary to faith or spiritual formation. However, thanks to my deep commitment to the UCC churches where I've made spiritual homes, I cannot *not* do theological work without this relationship, reflecting with the lives of the people I know in the pews, and without prayerfully taking into my scholarship the faithfulness that they have shared with me over the years. As a theologian *in* the UCC, I have had the freedom to imagine with my communities some new visions and dreams of God and church, because that freedom lies within the covenant that is bounded by the promise of God's forgiveness, a promise we act out together and extend beyond our church walls.

This promise of freedom and commitment to remaining in community with a worshipping church recently coalesced into a call to ministry at Keystone United Church of Christ in Seattle, where I have been called to the position as the associate minister for justice formation. Justice education and its role in faith formation is central to Keystone's mission. It already is known in the denomination for its Justice Leadership Program, a member of the Young Adult Service Communities program of the UCC that helps young adults make connections between their

service or justice organizing work and their faith journey. It also has developed other programs to make God's justice visible and accessible in Puget Sound, a region that largely leans toward the "spiritual but not religious." I am excited to begin this work with Keystone and its partners to dream new dreams about how we can learn together about all the ways God is calling each and every one of us to do justice where we are, in every way that we can, in preaching and teaching, telling and retelling at the table of welcome God's promise that the arc of universe bends toward justice, and discovering in the acts of Word, table, and solidarity the power of being a partner in God's creative work in the world.

UCC identity: Beginning in Action

The relationship between freedom and community is the cornerstone of UCC identity, reflected in both its polity and its history. Akin to Arendt's concepts of singularity and world, which are necessary for beginning to occur, the autonomy and covenant that define our denomination's self-understanding and self-governance are meant to generate the creative tension that gives our churches the freedom to orient themselves toward God's promise of hope, while remaining accountable to one another. This tension must be balanced, with both autonomy and covenant pushing and pulling in concert, without one side overwhelming the other. Keeping this equilibrium has been the challenge of our church since its various beginnings.

The polity of UCC churches is a religious iteration of the first governmental structures of the US colonies, which Arendt saw as an example of natality or *beginning* because of what she saw as the newness in structure.⁴ Rather than power and authority flowing down from the top toward

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977). It must be stated that Arendt was incorrect in labeling this governmental structuring as original to the US colonies. Recent scholarship places the genesis of this formation in the compacts formed by the indigenous peoples of what would be later called the Americas, most particularly the Iroquois Confederacy, which "was, and still is, the oldest participatory democracy on earth." See "American History Myths Debunked: No Native Influence on Founding Fathers," on Indian Country Today, <https://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/history/events/american-history-myths-debunked-no-native-influence-on-founding-fathers/> (accessed August 9, 2017).

church bodies, which was common in both church and state polities in Europe, the UCC organizes around a participatory, governmental structure in which clergy and church members work together to govern their churches, associations and conferences, and national offices, through the slow process of committee work that attempts to ensure that as many voices are heard as possible. However, the trick of that participation is that people have to participate, and they have the freedom to do so – or not. That is part of autonomy as well, the ability and opportunity to say no. However, ideally the “yes” and “no” of autonomy emerge through careful, prayerful discernment. We say “yes” and “no” after working out what we know and how our experiences have influenced our thinking and beliefs. We say “yes” and “no” out of the dictates of our individual consciences that help us determine how God is calling each of us to act in the world. Autonomy is the freedom to act responsibly, after examining ourselves thoroughly to know who we are, what we believe and trust in, and where we enter into *beginnings* in the world. However, we never enter alone. Autonomy is always seeped in covenant. We learn about God and what God is calling us all to do *together* — with one another in our churches, with others outside our church walls, with the voices from our histories and traditions.

The commitment to justice and refusal to leave the political outside the sanctuary doors were what drew me to the UCC, and they are still what provide me with the most uplifting moments and experiences of conviction and confirmation in the church. However, as my own relationships within the UCC and its ecumenical partners have both broadened and deepened, I have come to know that the orientation toward justice is not the sum and total of the UCC’s identity, and to my sorrow I have also seen that justice alone cannot sustain a church, especially when a church neglects its relationships with the wider church. Autonomy is a strength that falters without the

covenant connecting congregations, and individuals in those congregations, to others in our denomination and the wider world of faith. Our covenant takes the “united” in the United Church of Christ beyond just simple unity, which is often understood as “sameness”; rather, we are united because we’ve made the promise to be, despite our differences (and there are many). We are one because we *act* that way, by living into that promise of forgiveness and redemption in Christ, which like our hope in the kingdom of God is always coming and never quite arriving.

This tension between autonomy and covenant precedes our denomination’s 1957 genesis. Inherent in our “four streams” are traditions who rejected the state church’s power to dictate individual and congregational faith, and turned away from intellectualized, dogmatic statements in favor of a piety that focused more on one’s experience with God. Churches that join the UCC today typically are drawn to the denomination because of this freedom, which also encourages ecumenical and interfaith relationships with other faith traditions. Because we do not require theological supremacy, we are free to be in relationship with others — or not.

“Freedom” gets thrown about in political parlance these days, often defined as a liberation from limits, or the ability to fulfill one’s fullest potential. However, this is not the way the UCC has defined it, acknowledging that “freedom from” is best realized when paired with “freedom to.” Reflecting Paul’s words in his letter to the Galatians, our freedom isn’t just leeway to fulfill selfish desires, but rather “to serve each other through love” (Gal 5:13b, CEB). According to Jane Fidler Hoffman, the UCC holds its identity as a “covenantal network of autonomous bodies who ‘prize both freedom and accountability, the two always intertwined and to be negotiated’⁵.” Our freedom is always a freedom to accountability with one another, a freedom to limit one’s

⁵ Jane Fidler Hoffman, *Covenant: A Study for the United Church of Christ* (Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 2008), 42.

own desires and power in order to make way for one another, just as God limits God's power over us so that we might live out our own potential, and learn from our mistakes in that process.

This freedom-in-accountability, or autonomy-negotiated-with-covenant, means a patchwork of languages, beliefs, worship styles, music, and solidarities, stitched together through negotiation, humility, and enactments of God's grace. This means, for example, that while justice issues might be a commitment of the National Setting, or other national ministries of the UCC, they need not be the commitment of every church in the entire denomination; an emphasis on Trinitarian orthodoxy might be a founding principle for an individual in a congregation but not necessarily emphasized by their church, which might be exploring different ways of understanding that mystery of the relationship between God, Christ, Spirit, and church. This constant negotiation between freedom and accountability-in-covenant makes UCC identity an active one, in that it does not harden into border walls that prevent hospitality to any or all of God's people. UCC identity is part of the newness of the world that is embodied in the eschatological promise of God, where we imperfectly enact God's abundant welcome until the day when God welcomes us all.

Ministers and leaders in the United Church of Christ may be called to pastor in congregations and settings that may perform their understanding of faith and community in a very different way than the churches that birthed and/or nurtured them. Ministers, too, must maintain an openness to the prospects of newness that lay before them, while bringing with them the stories, relationships, solidarities and experiences that they have gained throughout their ministries in the UCC. Rather than insisting upon their own belief in where God is calling a congregation to be, ministers grounded in the negotiation of autonomous covenant listen deeply to where the

congregation hears its calling taking them, helping them work out that call in fear and trembling, but also love and service. The minister herself might find herself beginning in ministry in fear, trembling, and love, realizing the challenge of acting within a space where she never thought she would go, and discovering there an encounter with the forgiving power of the Spirit.

Beginning in Ministry, Acting as Church

Because ministry in the UCC is site of continuous beginnings and faithful acting, there are few bedrock foundations where ministers may rest easily. Ministry is constantly in motion, constantly negotiated; ministerial authority doesn't rest within a set of creeds or principles, but gently carried between the minister, the congregation, and the Spirit of God that connects and empowers each, held in relationship that is built week by week, visit by visit. Pastoral authority is a reflection of denominational power: Rather than the pastor being the person in power whose learnings or position makes them the final arbiter of orthodoxy or orthopraxis, ministerial authority in the UCC is bounded by ethics that return that authority to the original Latin meaning of the word authority, *auctoritas*, or the witness whose word gives credence and believability to another person's testimony. Pastoral authority isn't about *confirming* an authenticity of experience, but about co-creating an experience by *affirming* it *with* others. Pastoral authority in the UCC is less about proclaiming in confidence the "right" thing to do or believe, and more about witnessing with the community and affirming where divine love is springing up in their lives, in their struggles, and in their hopes, fears, pains and joys. In order to do this, pastors must be cognizant of their own hopes, fears, pains and joys, discovered repeatedly in times of prayer, reflection and meditation, in order to make sure that they do not supplant the calls of their congregation with their own call, or worse, force their calls onto others. This requires attention to pastoral boundaries, to relationships within the church and the wider church, and rigorous

reflection and self-scrutiny on where ministers hear God calling them to be. It necessitates practices of responsible self-care so that ministers can be response-able to the church, and the wider church, in times of crisis and prophetic action.

Two tools that assist in this ethical ministry are the ordination vows and the UCC Statement of Faith. Both remind pastors that the act of ministry isn't a heroic, individual effort, but a relational, communal, continual transformation. In the UCC Statement of Faith, there is a theology of community in which God is calling *us* (not just *me*) into fellowship and faithful action. The use of present-tense verbs and plural nouns repeatedly insist upon the moving nature of what we believe – or more accurately, what we have chosen to place our trust in. God calls, God seeks, God judges, Christ rises, God promises; and while we are objects of those direct actions, we also participate in their outcomes in our affirmation and response to that joyous activity and in-breaking. We act *with*, connecting our story of redemption not in our own works, but rather embedding our combined, covenanted actions in the faithfulness of God to us, and in our faithfulness to God and one another.

Likewise, the UCC's ordination vows also remind us that ministry is a communal, covenantal act. We do not minister outside of the trust and faithfulness that we have placed in God, and that God places in us, outside of the witness we bear to the presence of the living Christ in our lives and the lives of our parishioners, and to the power of the Spirit that renews and reinvigorates our covenant. Because we minister together, we have taken on the needs and responsibilities of one another, promising to make common cause with another in church and outside of our walls, to shoulder one another's burdens, to be mindful of the health of our minds, bodies, relationships, and those of our colleagues, parishioners, friends, and family. Although we believe that every person in this covenant is called to ministry, what makes ministers "set apart" is our

accountability to these vows and to one another, to be responsible, ethical, caring, and bold, and to take seriously and prayerfully the words and actions of those around us.

This communal understanding has helped me in my encounters with scripture. While I immensely enjoy exegetical studies of the biblical texts, I also am intellectually and spiritually thrilled by the insights that people bring into the texts *in conversation* with the texts themselves. I do not “believe” in a literal Bible, but I do advocate for taking these texts seriously as a bedrock of our faith and a voice that cries out to us to remind us of both where we have come from and where we are going. The story of our book never ends as long as we remain open to the promise of newness that takes place both in the pages and in the lives of the people who read and hear its wisdom. I do not read the Bible by itself, but with the whole lives of the people of my work and my world, and all their suffering and hopes, as translators for this time and this place. As there is no fence around our tables, there is no fence around our interpretations; they are free to be filled with the yeast of our world and our experience, especially when we bring our selves to become part of the story.

The Act of Divine Enfleshment: Sacrament and Church

A large part of the story of church and ministry is found in the sacraments, the promises made in baptism that are re-membered each week around the table in communion. My understanding of baptism comes from Paul’s letters, in which he argued that to be baptized was not just a cleansing away of the old life, but a participation in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ (Rom. 6:3). In the context of the 21st-century US, where Christianity is the religion of the majority by a comfortable margin, this entrance into the life of Christ can seem like joining an exclusive club that offers its members special privileges and benefits. However, at the time when Paul was writing his letters, he was proposing a dangerous, world-overturning act. To participate

in the life of Christ was to defy the religion of the empire that protected the empire from its enemies and guaranteed its successes. To put on Christ meant social ridicule and exclusion at best and persecution and death at worst, putting the lives of adherents at risk of literal and social death. But it also meant living in a way where the community shared in common all that they needed, and where social conventions such as gender, ethnicity, and social class were transcended. Baptism literally was new life re-created and re-membered out of the waters of chaos and into the kingdom of heaven.

Today, baptism can still mean this entry into shared community and dangerous faith. In the UCC, we have many different theologies of baptism and many different practices of baptism, but all point toward membership in a worldwide community where some are privileged and some are oppressed, some are joyful and some are grieving, some are powerful and some seek to enact the agency that has been stolen from them. As we put on Christ through our baptism, so we put on one another, and our baptism, however we understand it, is an acting toward God's promise that justice will roll down like water and that all the nations will be healed of their afflictions. Baptism is our promise in God, with God, and with one another who manifest a glimpse of God whenever we gather together for worship, that we will share equitably in a world where God's name is holy, God's will is done, and every person has enough daily bread. While we all may not share the same theological or spiritual understanding of what baptism might mean, in baptism we covenant to be the living sign of invisible grace that God has poured out upon the world.

One of the ways that we enact that grace is through communion, or the sharing of bread and cup around the Lord's Table. Communion is also understood as a method of participating in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, communing with him through the taking into the body of the elements and taking in the meaning of the action through the recited Words of Institution,

which retell the story of the night when Jesus shared the first communion with all his followers. What happens during that sacred meal is a mystery; whether the bread and wine become actual, literal flesh and blood of Christ through transubstantiation, or whether the meal is a spiritual gathering across time and space, or an *anamnesis* making every meal that first meal, what “happens” is understood through the matrix of beliefs, theologies, liturgical practices, and covenanted relationship that rises up from each person and each congregation. Rather than giving anyone an “easy” way out from making meaning about their communion theology, the UCC’s openness to beginning makes our theology a challenge because it must be free to move, grow, breathe, live, but in covenant. Because the UCC allows for a diversity of belief, the denomination cautions ministers to be careful to word liturgies, prayers, and reflections on communion theology to reflect that relational diversity. According to John H. Thomas:

If the objective nature of the gift is affirmed — faith recognizes what is given, rather than effecting the gift itself — present practice in the United Church of Christ is not all that different from that of the old Prussian Union of the nineteenth century in Germany (transplanted to American soil in the Evangelical Synod of North America. This approach glossed over the differences between Reformed and Lutheran doctrines of the Eucharist by offering as the formula of distribution the simple words, “Our Lord Jesus Christ says, ‘This is my body,’” a formula that leaves the meaning of presence open to the communicant’s convictions.”⁶

The UCC’s openness to the multiple meanings of the Lord’s Supper appealed to me and helped mold my faith and my theology. Communion has always been important to me, but in the context of the German Catholic Church in which I was raised, it seemed tied up with standards of behavior and the precariousness of my soul that was weighed down by sin, and also something that signified inclusion and exclusion. It was only after I started participating in communion at UCC and Christian Church/Disciples of Christ churches that practiced an open table that the meaning of communion as a sacrament opened up for me in a way I had never felt before.

⁶ John H. Thomas, “Recognition and the Presence of Christ at the Table,” in *Who Do You Say That I Am: Christology and Identity in the United Church of Christ*,” edited by Scott R. Paeth (Cleveland: United Church Press, 2006), 103.

Sharing the bread and the cup around the table communicated to me that I was *already* God's, that I didn't have to *do* or *believe* anything in order to be worthy of the love of God, nor could I ever do anything to be excluded from that love. I experienced the bread of life as taking in God through sharing of life-giving daily food with those around me, and the cup of the covenant as a promise of God's liberation from the sins that plague our world and keep us from being able to be in communion with one another. Bread and cup became signs of God's hospitality that said all are welcome in God's home, which is wherever the church is.

It is not lost on me that the simple elements of bread, wine and water have become the sacraments of our faith. Cut from seven in the Catholic Church to two in the Protestant traditions, the sacraments take basic, simple, necessities of daily life and survival and become signs of abundant life and divine community. Through the "radical act of divine enfleshment,"⁷ — a radical act because not because it was mysterious but because it infuses the mundane with the mystery — God *fleshed* in the world among God's creations. To imagine God as flesh — and the political context of that flesh — overturns the Manichaeian expectations of the world that divides the world neatly between good and evil, flesh and spirit, divine and mortal. Imagine God who hungers with us. Imagine God who weeps with us. Imagine God who *needs* baptism too (Mark 1:9-11), and imagine God who shares our bread and wine and shares a sacrifice that defied the empire of death, shares bread and wine, life and covenant, hospitality and hope. *How* that happens isn't as important as the fact that it *does* happen every time we share at the table. How that happens isn't as important as the wisdom that it imparts: That the injustices of the world do not have the last word, and that the love of God lasts with us forever, leaving us free to live for one another and for God.

⁷ Gabriel Fackre, "Jesus Christ in the Texts of the United Church of Christ," in *Who Do You Say That I Am*, 73.

I understand the sacraments as pathways through which human beings can begin this dance of divine enfleshment with God, and Christ, embodied in the church that is guided and comforted by the touch of the Spirit until we realize the kingdom of heaven on earth. The sacraments make the church a partner in the story of salvation and grace, letting us take in divinity and one another through the bread of life; letting us drink in the covenant of the promise of God's justice for the world and for one another; letting us enter into the waters of fear and uncertainty to emerge into lives of trust, solidarity, and love. Sacraments make the church, because they demonstrate how divinity meets us where we live, in bodies that need bread and water, and spirits that thirst for justice and comfort. Most notably, this meeting of divinity and humanity is embodied corporately, in the community together. As Rita Nakashima Brock wrote, Christ is not just the event or the man, but also the community that supported, followed, and lived in him, and lives in him still.⁸ We all may participate in the cosmic story of redemption individually, but we realize it when we come together, as church, as one. To minister in the context of that church is to take up the promise of the sacraments of newness of life that dismantles the powers of death that threaten God's people, and to share them with and within the people as nourishment for and remembrance of the long slow journey toward newness.

Conclusion: An Imperative to Begin in Ministry

I cannot imagine where my life and my scholarship would be without this covenant and in partnership with my church and my denomination, and this time in discernment for ministry. I suspect that without this seedbed for my studies, my theology would be dry and brittle bones that cannot live; without the ability to breathe life into my theological reflections through preaching, liturgical practice and pastoral encounters, my teaching would be clanging gongs and clashing

⁸ Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 1988).

cymbals. Thanks to the UCC, I have found myself *beginning* as a minister, because this denomination has shown me how freedom and forgiveness combine to remove any fear I might have had to act as God calls me to act, to be a member and leader within my worshipping communities.

I didn't recognize this call to ministry when it first appeared, because I didn't have the Protestant background or language to know what this was (and having been raised in the Catholic Church, didn't realize that women could minister!). But over the years this call has been reaffirmed and deepened at every turn: By classmates and professors, ministry colleagues and church members, through my own sense of what God is calling me to do in the world — and now through my call to minister with Keystone UCC. However, even with this affirmation, this call still often sits uncomfortably on me, but I suspect that is the point. It isn't supposed to be comfortable, but it is supposed to be imperative; I cannot *not* do it, and I cannot *not* say “Here I am,” when called to minister in congregational leadership or as a seminary professor who seeks to make the theological journeys of my students powerful, free, and covenanted.

I entered this discernment process with the Chicago Metropolitan Association of the UCC in order to deeply and prayerfully reflect on what I was hearing from those around me and from God. Through that discernment I have realized that while I am still called to teach and study, I now know that teaching and preaching has to take place in the spaces where two or three or more gather in God's name to re-member the life, death, and resurrection of our Christ, and where we all have become one by working together toward the life of the world to come that has been promised by our prophets and priests. The specific gathering community I choose to live this call out is with the the United Church of Christ, a denomination that imperfectly and earnestly tries to act out the Good News of a God of welcome, justice, love, and newness for the world.

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