

Finding myself in the love of God

God has always been present in and around my life. I was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan as the child of parents that grew up in the Jim Crow South. Their exposure and upbringing had a huge impact on how my brother and I were raised. My parents instilled the values of hard work, perseverance and a love of God that definitely shaped me into who I am today. I spent every summer, until the age of 14, in Baxley, Georgia with my mother's family. My Grandmother always spoke of the "man upstairs" and said that "the Lord works in mysterious ways" and "His ways are not our ways." As a small child, I found these sayings to be somewhat peculiar, but at the same time, I knew there was some credence to what she was saying, as I always knew that there was a higher power present in my life. I would even go as far to say that I could feel "protection" before I knew what to call the Holy Spirit.

As a child, I had so many questions about God that many of the adults in my life either refused to answer or did not have the language to articulate an answer to this inquisitive child. I was told many times, "We don't question God!" and to do so was "blasphemy." I was afraid to even ask what blasphemy was, but based on the tone of the word, I knew that it wasn't a good thing, so I decided that I would ask God my questions in my prayers, and hopefully "He" would provide the answers to me.

I wanted to know why God was a man. I wanted to see myself in God, and due to the gender binary and patriarchy that existed, I struggled

to find my place in God. I struggled to find myself in a “blue-eyed Jesus” that surely did not know what it was like to be a Black female in the “yet to be” United States of America. This quandary is one that I struggled with until I was in my late twenties.

I grew up in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church until my family transitioned to the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) when I was nine or ten years old. I immediately noticed the difference in the style of worship and I began to dread going to the LCMS church because I perceived the service to be extremely boring. I did not understand why all of the standing up, sitting down and kneeling were necessary. The one thing that I found to be refreshing about the LCMS was that the services were about an hour long and therefore, we were not in church for three hours on Sunday.

At the age of 12, I was enrolled in my confirmation class. I loved the confirmation process as it was structured and it gave me some definitive answers about religion and God. While I now see that some of the “answers” were dogma, I still relished in the ability to have my questions answered. My pastor, Rev. Milan W. Tonn, tried to answer all of my questions and if he did not know an answer, he would say that he did not know. That was so refreshing to me, as most adults in my experience, would not admit when they did not know something. However, I also think it was his way of saying, “this is too deep for me to address with you right

now,” and I was ok with his response, as he addressed my questions, instead of brushing me off.

After my confirmation, I had a new appreciation and understanding for the LCMS style of worship, and I grew to love it because I now understood the “backstory” or the names of the doxology, confession, etc..

I attended a LCMS high school and while there was where I first heard the voice of God. In my junior year of high school, while sitting in a class called Christian Doctrine, I began to hear the voice of God. The voice became louder in my senior seminar called Christian Life. In this class, one semester was spent in the study of all world religions and the other was spent in the study of cult religions. I found this to be one of the most fascinating courses that I have had in my entire educational career, as it opened my eyes to the notion that God has many names and that God is loved by many.

While I was in high school, I knew that I wanted to pursue a career in medicine, but I also knew that I had this pull to know more about God and to be in service to God. I made the decision to go to medical school when I found out that the LCMS would not ordain women. I had resigned myself to the fact that my ministry would be one through the healing arts, not one that required a divinity degree, as God could see that I was in the LCMS. Even after the completion of my medical school and residency training, the desire to learn more and do more for God never went away. After marrying my husband and starting our family, the voice of God had

become a whisper at this stage of my life, but became louder the older my children became.

My now husband, but then boyfriend, was a member of Trinity United Church of Christ, and I remember the first time I went to church with him. Trinity's motto of "Unashamedly Black and Unapologetically Christian" resonated with me in a way that I was not aware that I needed resonance. For the first time in my life, I felt fully a part of the body of Christ; my formative years were spent in a denomination that was predominately white and patriarchal. I was blown away at the worship and the number of Black women that were in the pulpit. In my LCMS context, women were relegated to dressing the altar and that was as far as a woman would get in the pulpit. The sermon on that Sunday was not given by the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, but by an African American woman. I had no idea who she was, but I was greatly moved by her sermon and her being. It was that day that I finally saw and felt that God was not a man, nor did God have color. It was on that day, that the "blue-eyed" Jesus became unnecessary and obsolete. My Jesus looked like my Daddy and given that there was no one who was alive that had actually walked with Jesus to paint him, my Jesus could look like whomever I wanted him to look like.

I would get married in Detroit, Michigan, at the church where I grew up and was baptized, but I would later become a member of Trinity United Church of Christ, so that my family would be members of the same house of worship.

One of the biggest decisions that I made was to take a step back from the practice of medicine to be more present for my family. My husband and I discussed it and he was totally on board with the decision. For a very long time I found myself trying to make people outside of my family comfortable with our decision. After the continued statements of, “but you went to school for so long” and “that is such a waste of education”, I eventually tuned them out and continued on the path that my husband and I agreed would be in the best interest of our family. I cherish the decision, as I have two well-adjusted, wonderful children. This decision definitely brought me closer to God, as I prayed for continued peace with our decision.

While raising my children, I became a part of a ministry called Moms in Prayer International. This ministry is structured so that groups of mothers meet weekly for one hour to pray for their children and their schools. Before I knew it, I was a leader of the elementary group. I went on to become a leader of the junior high group and went on to serve as one of the leaders of the high school group. I am currently serving as a leader of a college praying moms group. I have enjoyed interceding for my children and their schools with other moms that love their children as much as I do.

The call to ministry began to become much louder in my ears as my children grew. Throughout our marriage, my husband and I began to compose our “bucket lists.” Every January, we would cross off the things

that we had completed and rearrange the remaining items. Attending seminary had always been on my list, but it continued to move up on the list. One day, out of nowhere, my husband told me that I should go to seminary. Our children were older and now was the time for me to pursue the first thing on my “bucket list.” That Sunday at church my husband told our pastor, the Rev. Dr. Ozzie E. Smith, Jr., that I wanted to attend seminary. My pastor told me about the discernment weekend at McCormick Theological Seminary and the next thing I knew, I was in attendance.

I struggled with some of the denominational stances taken by the United Church of Christ. I was raised to believe that homosexuality was a sin, especially in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. However, my mother did not believe that to be true. She always said that God did not make mistakes and if “he” did not make mistakes, then how could we condemn someone to hell for something that they could not change? Sexuality was something that you just had and given this, how could we ask someone to make another “choice” other than the one that was natural for them? Especially when this choice was not harmful to anyone. I pondered this, as I would read otherwise in the “Holy Bible”..... This was truly a struggle for me, as I knew what my mother said was true and yet, I struggled.....until I met a friend that was a gay Black man while in graduate school earning my Masters in Public Health.

In his letting me into his life, I gained great insight around the struggles that he faced as a Black, gay man. He loved Jesus and God, but he knew that he could not be his “authentic” self in the church. That made me so sad, as I could come to church with my husband and not be ostracized. One day, one of our classmates made the statement that homosexuality was a “choice.” My friend did not respond as he did not want to be ostracized by the other Black students, but later I knew he needed to address that “statement” and decompress. He began by stating that his orientation was not a choice and that it infuriated him that Black Christians were so quick to throw someone that was same-gender loving into hell with words from the same Bible that was used as justification for the enslavement of Africans in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. It was in that moment that I realized that we are all God’s children and we all are deserving of God’s love. Further, I would now join Trinity United Church of Christ, as I had reconciled with the United Church of Christ’s acceptance of everyone as children of God.

The United Church of Christ’s statement of faith is an inclusive document that uses the language of today to provide guidance on faith.

This statement recognizes God as an eternal spirit. This statement is open enough for me to find the “God” that I need; meaning that with God as an eternal spirit, God transcends total understanding by humans. Humans have always tried to put God in a box of their choosing by making God male, making God white or making God punishing and full of wrath.

I have come to identify with a God that is neither male, nor female, as I believe that God transcends the gender binary. However, I have never questioned that God was present in my life. What has changed is how I view God.

This statement also recognizes and confers the reassurance that Jesus sent the “comforter” or the Holy Spirit to dwell with us as our guide. The Holy Spirit serves to remind us of Christ’s presence in our lives as members of the family of God.

This statement further assures all that God promises “to all who trust in the gospel forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, the presence of the Holy Spirit” an eternal life in the “kingdom which has no end.”¹

I believe that God is with us in our walk-through life and on our faith journey. I have come to realize that God truly is present in all things that are of God’s creation. In the tearing down and through the breaking of the patriarchal structures that were built during my formative years, I have come to recognize God as a God that created me as a good thing, with purpose and on purpose!

God created humanity in God’s own image, in the divine image God created them; male & female God created them.

Genesis 1:27 CEB

¹ Robert V. Moss, *Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ* (<https://www.ucc.org/what-we-believe/worship/statement-of-faith>).

I believe that all humanity is created in the image of God. I have an image of God through my relationship with Christ. My faith is born out of that personal response to the story of Jesus and through my personal relationship with Jesus. I now see that the search that some of us have with defining the “Imago-Dei” and the character of God is one that is shared by Jesus and all of God’s children. It does not matter if they come from a different culture, ethnicity, faith tradition or social standing, it is my responsibility to ensure that they know that I affirm who they are as they, too are created in the image of God. This affirmation of who they are and whose they are is something that will be my responsibility as a member of the ordained clergy. This affirmation is paramount in the building of the community of God. This community of God, is not just made up of Christians; it is made up of all of the people of God’s creation. This creates a shared stake in the world that God created and called into being. In Genesis 1, God called all of God’s creation good; therefore, it does not matter what we believe or where we believe it because God has already called it good!

These good creations have to experience God in their own way. Theologian Howard Thurman says on the experience of God that, “You can’t be taught it as much as it can be caught.” Many believe that the mere act of going to church and being in fellowship with other believers, will ensure an experience with God. I agree with Dr. Thurman that each

person's experience with God is unique and is not something that can be taught.

In experiencing God for ourselves, we find a new appreciation for what Jesus did on the cross for us. This ultimate sacrifice of crucifixion by Jesus sheds a light on sin and oppression. Sin is what we all do, but how we respond to sin is indicative of our relationship with God. When we sin, we alienate ourselves from God. In Jesus' sacrifice of dying on the cross, his burial and resurrection, we are freed from the bondage of sin and therefore are restored into fellowship with God. God can never be taken away from us, as God has showed us in the incarnation of Jesus that we all share a common path through Jesus.

Jesus found himself in the position of being of service to all in his life, crucifixion, death and resurrection. Jesus was and is a revolutionary for peace and justice in an extremely unjust world. Jesus called "sinners" as they were and was accepting of them as they were, without the act of repentance. Jesus taught everyone to love their neighbor as themselves and was crucified because he dared to challenge the status quo of oppression that existed in his society.

What does it mean to conquer sin and death? It is through the resurrection of Jesus that we stand in victory over death. When we love God, we have hope and it is through that hope that we conquer the sting of death. Death is not only viewed as the death of the physical body, but also the estrangement from God secondary to sin. Jesus' death and

resurrection has removed the consequence of death from our existence. This belief in the hope of an eternal life with God after our physical death lends itself to the hope in the salvation through the resurrection of Jesus. Liberation is a byproduct of this faith in Jesus, as we are freed from the spiritual death that our physical death will bring.

Faith is necessary to understand the relationship of our salvation through the cross. The cross, at the time of Jesus, represented a symbol of oppression. However, through our faith in the resurrection of Jesus, the cross becomes a symbol of freedom.

Dr. James Cone in his book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, speaks of salvation in this way: “salvation is broken spirits being healed, voiceless people speaking out, and Black people empowered to love their own Blackness.”² As a Black woman, this statement resonates with me as it demonstrates the path that I have walked in my faith journey. Society at large has criminalized the color of my skin and therefore, my spirit has been broken on many occasions, but through my faith in Jesus dying on the cross for my salvation, my spirit has been healed. I have been voiceless because many structures in our society do not honor the voices on those that reside on the margins of society. However, I have found my voice through the salvation of Jesus. I have also come to wholeheartedly come to LOVE my Blackness, as I am a good creation of God and God does not make mistakes! I love who I am and whose I am.

² James Cohn, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011) 158.

The healing garnered through the cross cannot be taken away. However, Dr. Cone, makes a parallel that can be found between the Cross and the lynching tree in the Jim Crow South:

“The lynching tree—so strikingly similar to the cross on Golgotha—should have a prominent place in American images of Jesus’ death. But it does not. In fact, the lynching tree has no place in American theological reflections about Jesus’ cross or in the proclamation of Christian churches about his Passion. The conspicuous absence of the lynching tree in American theological discourse and preaching is profoundly revealing, especially since the crucifixion was clearly a first-century lynching. In the “lynching era,” between 1880 to 1940, white Christians lynched nearly five thousand black men and women in a manner with obvious echoes of the Roman crucifixion of Jesus. Yet these “Christians” did not see the irony or contradiction in their actions.”³

I find this lack of attention to those that live and exist on the margins of society will always find parallels in their existences and the death of Jesus on the cross. There will always be racist Christians and that makes me sad, but I have hope in the salvation of all through the belief in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus for all people.

Jesus walked after his resurrection with scars. He was healed and whole, and yet, he had scars. Salvation and reconciliation does not promise an easy life with the emotional or physical, but it does give a healing that is un-paralleled in its existence. Jesus stands with us in our hurt and our healing. The scars serve to remind us how powerful the love of God is.

Reconciliation is the restoration of our relationship with God. If we are true and authentic with ourselves, then we can have a true and authentic relationship with God. It is through the grave of Jesus that we

³James Cohn, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011)

experience God's unmatched love. Once we know the love of God, it is our responsibility to share that love with others. It is our responsibility to pray, not just for ourselves, but for others. This does not mean that we neglect our needs, as clergy we are only good to others if we practice self-care.

Sacraments

Water is an element that is made from two-parts hydrogen and one-part oxygen and it is synonymous with cleansing. We cannot clean ourselves or many of our items in our lives without it. Water stands as the element that is used in the sacrament of Baptism. Baptism serves as an outward sign of an internal condition of grace. It is through the sacrament of Baptism that we are welcomed into the body of Christ through the symbolic cleansing of Baptism. Baptism by water and the Holy Spirit serves as a symbol of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection. It also implies our confession of sin and the change of our hearts.

Baptism serves to unite us with God through the use of a water containing ritual. I do not believe that Baptism is a necessity for salvation, as John 3:16 says otherwise. However, it is a ritual that welcomes members into a church community and unifies the body of Christ.

Baptism also symbolizes transformation. The addition of new members to the body of Christ changes the church and the community. This addition allows for fresh, new thoughts and ideas to be integrated into the body, which is exactly how Jesus lived his life. Jesus introduced new ideas that were contrary to the status quo. Jesus lost his life for his

thoughts and ideas, but the body grew and did not die. The act of Baptism serves as a conduit for the church to flourish.

Baptism serves as an identification with Christ, whether it is an adult, infant or child that is welcomed into the fold. The Baptism of infants is just as valid as the Baptism of an adult. Infants grow in their faith surrounded by a community that will love them and show them the love of God as they grow—both spiritually and physically.

Confirmation serves as the bookend to Baptism, in that it gives the infant whose parents spoke for them at Baptism, the opportunity to speak their faith for themselves.

Holy Communion or the Lord's Supper is another sacrament that serves as an act of community empowerment. Jesus had the last supper with his disciples before he was betrayed, and he used bread and wine to symbolize his body and blood that was sacrificed for all of God's creation. This Passover meal that was shared with Jesus' disciples became the new covenant that was sealed by the blood shed by Jesus at Calvary. This memorial meal serves as a refresher to those in community for their individual ministries. Communion is symbolized through bread and wine, but those two simple things are used to remind us of Christ's victory over the sting of death.

This memorial meal binds us together in Christian unity, which allows us to recognize God's presence and divine providence in our lives.

God uses the very simple elements of water, bread and wine to do the extraordinary work of showing love, extending belonging and building the community of Christ.

As a body of Christ, we are obligated to one another. It is through this obligation of covenant in Christ, that we must not close this act of sharing and forgiveness. The Lord's table should be open to everyone, so all can celebrate living in the love of God.

History & Polity

The United Church of Christ was formed by the merger of four streams or churches (German Evangelical, Reformed, Congregational & Christian Churches). The initial four became two bodies of Christ, as the Congregational and Christian Churches were united on June 27, 1931 and the Evangelical and Reformed churches united on June 26, 1934. The United Church of Christ was formed in 1957 as the two bodies became one. Each of the bodies of Christ has their own histories and customs that wove the tapestry of the UCC: The Christian Church's view that its members are part of the body of Christ; the German Evangelical belief in spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ; the Congregational church's belief that each member is important and the Reformed Church's belief in the authority of God, scripture as the primary, justification by faith and the priesthood of all believers.

John 7:21, "that they may all be one" has continued to serve as a principle of guidance for this denomination as well as the denominational

motto. The UCC supports a “unity within our diversity” due to our bond in Jesus Christ. This denomination lives by this and is open to hearing the voice of God that is still speaking. The United Church of Christ realizes that the Bible is not the final word of God, though it recognizes that God does speak through those pages assembled. However, the Bible is not the inerrant word of God, but rather a collection of books and writings that were called the “word of God” by our church Fathers and Mothers.

I became a member of the United Church of Christ because it is a denomination that takes stands and supports social justice issues. The support of issues that affect the “least of these” is a demonstration of how the United Church of Christ not only talks the talk, but it is a body of Christ that walks the walk. These actions and public declarations demonstrate the covenantal nature of the United Church of Christ as the body that truly seeks for all to be one.

The beauty of the United Church of Christ is that it is autonomous and covenantal, which is a central tenant of the denomination. Autonomy and covenant are two characteristics that are equal in significance. Each local church is autonomous, which is a church that is self-governing. This autonomy is codified in the Constitution of the United Church of Christ, which says:

The autonomy of the Local Church is inherent and modifiable only by its own action. Nothing in this Constitution and the Bylaws of the United Church of Christ shall destroy or limit the right of each Local Church to continue to operate in the way customary to it; nor shall be construed as giving to the General Synod, or to any Conference or Association now, or at any

*future time, the power to abridge or impair the autonomy of any Local Church in the management of its own affairs.*⁴

This paragraph assures each congregation their own autonomy in how they choose to function and govern itself as well as how they worship and live out their ministry in the world.

However, the autonomy of the United Church of Christ can also be seen as a double-edged sword, in that you do not know what you find in a congregation until you arrive. Traditionally, congregations reflect their denominational positions/theologies and attending a congregation anywhere, one would expect the same beliefs expressed. However, if you are a member of the LGBTQ+ community, one may think that all congregations are open and affirming, as that is the denominational stance, but one may not be aware that the congregations are autonomous.

Covenant is equally important to the United Church of Christ, as it demonstrates the level of commitment of our church to form a new covenant that we would all be one. Covenant is something that is available to all of God's people and it requires that we become a community of faith that is open to everyone.

This covenant relationship in the UCC is actually a covenant within a covenant, as the UCC's constitution and bylaws delineate this relationship. Ruben Shears explained in his article, "*A Covenant Polity*", that the covenantal relationship exists among and between the body of

⁴ <https://www.ucc.org/who-we-are/constitution-and-bylaws> paragraph 18

Christ within the covenant that God established and is maintained in Jesus Christ, as the head of the church. The basic unit of the UCC is the local church and it is in a covenantal and autonomous relationship with the Association, Conference and General Synod. These relationships allow for a distribution of power, mutual accountability and fellowship. Each body is first accountable to Jesus Christ and is free to obey and follow the head of the church. The covenantal documents (Constitution and Bylaws) serve as covenant within the covenant of grace, which calls us to action as God calls us in the church; a covenant of faithful people.

My seminary journey has been a life-changing experience. I have always loved school, but the seminary academic journey was different in that it challenged what I thought I knew, granted me many sleepless nights, and led to great personal growth and a stronger relationship with my God. I would now define my relationship with God as one that has matured beyond anything that I could have imagined before I began my journey through seminary.

I have found myself at this point in my life on this journey and I know that God loves me. I desire to be ordained in the United Church of Christ because I know that this denomination is one that is actively working to be inclusive, so that all will know and feel the love of God. I was taught that the word love is a verb and this denomination attempts to intentionally live in the love of God. I have been called by the great "I AM" to show the love of Christ to my fellow human beings. It is my hope that

my ministry will reflect the love of God in helping people to understand that God made them and called them good; no matter their mistakes, they will be loved because of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

While I have always had a passion for the healing arts, I have come to realize that I have the knowledge to heal bodies through the science of modern medicine, and with the love of God in Christ Jesus, I can be an active participant in the path to heal the human spirit.

Frederick Buechner said that, "Vocation is the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need."⁵ Upon entering seminary, I was not clear on what kind of ministry that I would pursue. I knew that God would show me in her time, where she wanted me to be.

I now feel that I have found that place where my deep gladness meets the world's deep need and that for me is in hospital chaplaincy. When I participated in my first unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), I realized that chaplaincy would require a more extensive exploration from me, as I found certain aspects of my experience with chaplaincy were frustrating. I felt like an Emergency Room physician that just stabilized a patient or put a band-aid on a wound, and sent the patient to their respective service without any follow-up. That same level of frustration twenty-eight years ago led me to pursue a career in Family Medicine and it is in that same

³Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seekers ABC* (San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco, 1993)

level of frustration that led me to pursue a residency as a Hospital Chaplain. This frustration also awakened an excitement to be in an environment that was familiar to me, and it also presented a huge challenge for me: to be a Chaplain and not the treating physician. That challenge led to my becoming a chaplain resident, which allowed for the further clarification of my call to ministry.

As a hospital chaplain, I am called to provide good spiritual care to anyone, no matter their religious beliefs, which requires that I keep my heart open and not project any of my anxiety or concerns onto the patient. Patients or staff members may need someone to listen to them and others may need a shoulder to cry on. For many people who request spiritual care in the hospital, the encounter allows them to address some aspect of their lives without a medical purpose in a hospital setting. Chaplaincy is good care, as the skills required to execute the art of chaplaincy well, are the same skills required to give good pastoral care in parish ministry.

Becoming a chaplain has allowed me to understand and appreciate the privilege of walking with patients and their families during stressful times. To be invited in—to walk along side of people at their lowest as a representative of the Divine-- is indeed a privilege. This walk is not one to be taken lightly, as there are some days that are so emotionally heavy that I have to be very intentional about taking time to reflect and recharge myself. Chaplaincy has taught me how to be effective in self-care that is replenishing and life giving.

As an ordained minister, I will be granted the privilege to represent Christ in the actions of uniting couples, the burial of the deceased and in the consecration and distribution of our sacraments in my congregation or in the hospital.

We live in a society that is predominately “either or”, but I serve a God that is “both and.” As a chaplain, I serve and support whomever shows up, just as Jesus did. Ephesians 3:20 speaks of a God that can do “exceedingly and abundantly above anything that I can ask, dream or imagine” and because this is the God that I serve, I have no doubt that I can serve well in my local congregation and as a hospital Chaplain.

While my journey has had its twists and turns, I would not change a thing as I know that all things work for the good of those who love the Lord. In my moments of doubting my ability to serve God in this capacity, I remember that Moses doubted his ability to accept what God had called him to do. God demonstrated through Moses that she does not call the qualified; God qualifies those whom she has called.⁶ I reflect on the fact that God has loved me into my authentic self and this love has empowered me to serve all of God’s creation as best as I can. It is my sincere hope that I will represent her well and that She will never regret having called me to the ordained level of her service.

⁶ Mark Batterson, *The Circlemaker: Praying Circles Around Your Biggest Dreams and Greatest Fears* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011)

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