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A Feminist Political Theological Ethics of Formation: Being and Becoming Christian in the Face of American Christian Nationalism

Sara Wilhelm Garbers

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

A FEMINIST POLITICAL THEOLOGICAL ETHICS OF FORMATION:

BEING AND BECOMING CHRISTIAN IN

THE FACE OF AMERICAN CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN INTEGRATIVE STUDIES IN ETHICS AND THEOLOGY

BY

SARA WILHELM GARBERS

CHICAGO, IL

AUGUST 2022

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is the sound of one voice
One spirit, one voice
The sound of one who makes a choice
This is the sound of one voice
This is the sound of one voice

This is the sound of voices two
The sound of me singing with you
Helping each other to make it through
This is the sound of voices two
This is the sound of voices two

—The Wailin’ Jennys, “One Voice”¹

I write these words with deep awareness of the many who have made me, my life, and this dissertation possible. I am indebted to the generations of women and those who have labored for equality, rights, and justice. Their struggles have allowed me to become myself as a minister, parent, partner, scholar, activist, ethicist, feminist, writer, citizen, Christian, family member, and friend.

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¹ The Wailin’ Jennys, “One Voice,” track 1 on *40 Days*, Red House, 2004, compact disc (CD).

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² Joy Harjo, “Annunciation,” in *A Map to the Next World: Poems and Tales* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 120.

³ Joy Harjo, “Remember,” in *She Had Some Horses* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 35.

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To those who wish to embody faith and spirituality that is committed to flourishing life and justice: I see you and this work is for and in solidarity with you.

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⁴ "Come What May," track 11 on Baz Luhrmann, *Moulin Rouge: Music from Baz Luhrmann's Film*, Interscope 490507-2, 2001, compact disc (CD).

⁵ Tish Melton, "We Can Do Hard Things," single, *We Can Do Hard Things*, Tish Melton, 2021, Spotify Streaming Audio, 320 kpbs.

This is the sound of all of us
Singing with love and the will to trust
Leave the rest behind, it will turn to dust
This is the sound of all of us.
This is the sound of one voice
One people, one voice
A song for every one of us
This is the sound of one voice

—The Wailin’ Jennys, “One Voice”⁶

⁶ The Wailin’ Jennys, “One Voice.”

To all who have been harmed by Christianity, White Supremacy, and Colonialism:
this work is my effort to help myself, my people, and my tradition become more human.

I have come that they might have life, and that everyone, yes everyone might have it.

—Jesus in John 10:10

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation follows in the tradition of New Political Theology (following the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Dorothee Sölle in particular) in conversation with critical political ethics (Hille Haker) and feminist praxis. It explores what it means to be and become Christian in the face of American Christian Nationalism. The first part of the dissertation situates the project as that of a feminist political theological ethics of formation. The second part outlines the tradition of New Political Theology and details pertinent elements from the work of Bonhoeffer and Sölle that I take up in my constructive project. The third part is the contextual exploration and involves two tasks. It begins with an exploration of my work as a minister and explores the role of the minister as a preacher. The next chapters detail my vision for an ethics of formation for both the individual and community, offering a political theological ethics that is explicitly feminist and creatively disobedient and disruptive in its aim to form Christians who can resist and become/be Christian in the face of American Christian Nationalism.

INTRODUCTION

Watchin' our youth have to solve our problems
I'll follow them, so who's comin' with me?

—The Chicks, “March, March”¹

In 2015 Donald Trump became the Republican Party’s presidential candidate. As a daughter of the Moral Majority, I was aware that I had moved far from my community of origin in terms of theological and political affirmations, yet I was unprepared for the ways in which Evangelical Christian leaders in the United States not only *did not oppose* Trump’s candidacy but became leading champions of his cause.² I was horrified: what had I missed in the conservative religious and political community of my youth such that I was shocked by the religious right’s celebration of a man who clearly was opposed to so much of what I had learned about faith growing up regarding the centrality of scripture and moral purity? This dissonance forced an inner reckoning with my faith and background.

Since that time I, along with many white Americans, have been confronted in new ways by aspects of our country’s history and faith’s complicity in genocide, violence, and denial of human rights. As a Christian, a feminist ethicist, and minister, I have wrestled with what it means

¹ The Chicks, “March, March,” track 6 on *Gaslighter*, Columbia, 2020, compact disc (CD).

² The only major exception to this was then president of Oklahoma Wesleyan University Everett Piper who said he would not invite the presidential hopeful to speak at his school. Everett Piper, “Trumping Morality,” *Muskogee Politico* (January 2016; originally published on the school blog but has since been removed), accessed June 12, 2022, <https://www.muskogeepolitico.com/2016/01/everett-piper-trumping-morality.html>.

to be Christian in our time but also in view of our national history which includes the dual genocide of native persons and genocide and enslavement of black persons.

I have been alarmed by much of white Christianity in the United States and our public alignment with white supremacy and refusal to be honest about our history. I have watched as family and friends were taken in by the rhetoric from Fox News and the like, believing there is a war on Christmas, the police, and white men in particular. In response, I have taken up the questions: (1) What do I do with where I am from (I am a white person who was raised as Evangelical Christian in the suburbs)? and; (2) What are the ways I might work for justice in our time as a Christian feminist ethicist and minister? One way I answered these questions was in January of 2018 I left my work as a minister at a downtown progressive congregation to become a minister at Colonial Church in Edina, Minnesota. I consciously did so out of desire to see if I might help to build bridges for transformation and healing in a white suburban Christian community of faith. I set out to help us in joining the work of common humanity and embodying a Christianity that can be truly Christian in the view of the resurgence of white American Christian Nationalism.

This dissertation recounts my efforts to help lead my church from 2018-2022 through the end of the Trump presidency and continued political rancor, COVID, the murder of George Floyd, and international reckoning with racism. It asks what it means to be and become Christian in the face of American Christian Nationalism through a contextual exploration of my preaching and leadership in the congregation where I serve as a minister. As a work of feminist political theological ethics, I seek to help form a community and the individuals therein to be creatively disobedient and able to resist so that they might become and be Christian.

In the first part I situate the project, narrating my own location, my work as a minister, the task of theo-ethical formation, and the context and history of my church (Chapter 1). The second part comprises of three chapters. In Chapter 2 I turn to the lineage of political theology, detailing its aims and naming why I take up New Political Theology as a resource to resist American Christian Nationalism. I connect this with my work, which I have come to identify as a political theological ethics that is particularly feminist and focused on moral formation. I then take up two political theologians who have shaped my work: Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Chapter 3) and Dorothee Sölle (Chapter 4). Through exploration of their work, I name how I—as a white American—seek to take up responsibility for the horrors wrought by my faith tradition, reaching for language and ways to be Christian in a “world come of age” (Bonhoeffer) and trying to wed mysticism and theo(po)et(h)ics (Sölle).

In the third part I turn to my contextual work as a minister. Here I detail why I turn to sermons and my understanding of the minister as a preacher (Chapter 5) and what this means for a feminist political theological ethics of formation. In Chapters 6-9 I re-examine my sermons from an ethical perspective. I do so through engagement with two pillars of ethical reasoning: teleological and deontological ethics through the perspective of both individual and social/institutional lenses. This is in dialogue with theological imaginations and conceptions of God that inform my ethics. I conclude by naming how the stories we tell matter for the future story we will write and live together. Finally, in the appendices I offer documents that should aid the reader who desires a deeper dive into the matters that shaped this project.

Appendix A is an Indigenous Land Acknowledgment. Appendix B is the document that was made for church’s 50th anniversary in 1996. Appendix C is a summary from the ReForming

process that the church undertook in order to discern what is next in the life of the community.

Appendix D details the church's values and priorities post-Reforming. Appendix E is a document that my colleague Christian Collins Winn put together as we were working to change the name of the church from Colonial to Meetinghouse Church. Finally, Appendix F includes the full texts of my sermons given from January 2018-June 2022.

It is my hope that what follows will be an aid, challenge, and invitation to Christians, particularly white Christians that we might become honest about our past, taking up responsibility for it in view of the horrors of our history and present complicity in the machinations of white supremacist American Christian Nationalism in order to build a world that is more just for all people and a faith wherein Christians might be known, as Jesus prays, by our love.

PART I
INTRODUCING A FEMINIST POLITICAL
THEOLOGICAL ETHICS OF FORMATION

CHAPTER ONE

SITUATING A FEMINIST POLITICAL THEOLOGICAL ETHICS OF FORMATION

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting —
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

—Mary Oliver, “Wild Geese”¹

A Feminist Political Theological Ethics of Formation: My Locatedness

To take up any work of feminist ethics, one is tasked with naming the locatedness of one’s story and identities which shape and inform how one shows up and attends to the work.²

¹ Mary Oliver, “Wild Geese,” in *Devotions: The Selected Poetry of Mary Oliver* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017): 347. I will say more about this later, but poetry and music will feature throughout the dissertation as a constituent aspect of my ethics of formation.

² For, indeed as the feminist affirmation has long named: “the personal is political.” As Hille Haker notes: “(F)eminist ethics, like decolonial ethics, insists on the necessity of reflecting upon how one’s own experiences are related to the epistemological, ethical, and political structures that shape social practices, including the practice of academic research.” Hille Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics, Catholic Ethics and Social Challenges* (Basel, Switzerland: Schwabe Verlag | Echter Verlag, 2020), 15. For more Feminist Political Theologies see, for instance:

This undertaking is no less necessary in a dissertation that follows in the tradition of the New Political Theologies (I will work with Bonhoeffer and Söelle in particular) in conversation with ethics and moral formation as I wrestle with what it means to be and become Christian in the face of American Christian Nationalism through my preaching and leadership in the congregation where I serve as a minister.³ What follows then is an exploration of preaching as a contextual ethics of formation, embodied through my work as a feminist political theological ethicist. Herein I will articulate an ethics of formation on the individual and communal levels, offering a political theological ethics that is explicitly feminist and creatively disobedient and disruptive in its aim to form Christians who can resist and be/become Christian in the face of

Rachel Sophia Baard, “Feminist Theologies” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Political Theology*, ed. Rubén Rosario Rodríguez (New York: T&T Clark, 2020), 495-522; Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-Logos of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993); Marcella Althaus-Reed, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973); Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (New York: Continuum, 1978); Wonhee Anne Joh, *Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology* (Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox Press, 2006); Eva Feder Kittay, *Love’s Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Mary E. Hawkesworth, *Beyond Oppression: Feminist Theory and Political Strategy* (New York: Continuum, 1990); Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Sandra Sullivan-Dunbar, *Human Dependency and Christian Ethics, New Studies in Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

³ In chapter 2 I will detail more about the lineage of New Political Theology and my language here and throughout the dissertation regarding “being and becoming Christian in the face of American Christian Nationalism.” In summary though, this is a way of naming that with and since the election of Donald Trump in 2016 (and leading up to it), we have witnessed a resurgent (and reactive) white supremacist Christianity in America rooted in a long tradition of understanding the American Project in terms of our “Manifest Destiny” of being “God’s Chosen People” and the way that this belief impacts US politics today and the church in America. See, for instance: Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020). See also: Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020) and their original article Andrew L. Whitehead et al., “Make America Christian Again: Christian Nationalism and Voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election,” *Sociology of Religion* 79, no. 2 (2018):147–71; Angela Denker, *Red State Christians: Understanding the Voters Who Elected Donald Trump* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019); Samuel Stroope et al., “Unchurched Christian Nationalism and the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election,” *Sociological Forum* 36, no. 2 (2021): 405–425; Philip Gorski, “Why Evangelicals Voted for Trump: A Critical Cultural Sociology,” *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 5, no. 3 (2017): 338–54; and Michelle Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).

American Christian Nationalism.⁴

I begin then with a sense of my own locatedness as a queer white woman raised inside of fundamentalist evangelicalism in the tradition of a Scandinavian immigrant family, raised on welfare, an early convert to Christianity, educated, and now middle-class. I am partnered with a cis-gendered man and work as a pastor, educator, and activist. My commitment to embodying a feminist political theological ethics arises in many ways out of my own story and experiences as I seek to press my discipline to develop and articulate theologies of life that honor the dignity of all persons.

I come to this work steeped in the waters of Christian theological imaginations.⁵ I scarcely have memory of the world before it was shaped by Christian spirituality. I was not yet four years old when I read John 3:16 for the first time: “For God so loved the world, that he (*sic*) gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” The story I have long told of this experience is of me running home to tell my mom, “Mommy! Mommy! Jesus loves me!” As the story goes, I started crying due to my distress that I did not know how to love Jesus back. For younger me, the thought of being loved without knowing how to love in return was devastating. The early sense of God being love as discovered

⁴ I will root my work inside of this tradition of political theological ethics in chapter two, naming why I turn to Sölle and Bonhoeffer as particular conversation partners.

⁵ I am forever indebted to H. Richard Niebuhr for his prologue to *The Responsible Self*. Titled, “On Christian Moral Philosophy,” in this piece Niebuhr narrates his locatedness as a Christian ethicist. Having been raised inside of a stark either/or framework for apprehending faith and identity, this brief prologue has aided me greatly in naming my decisions to remain Christian. For while I believe there are many languages and ways of naming the sacred and divine, I have been formed in the waters of Christianity and see part of my own work of (to use Niebuhr’s language) the “fitting” thing demands that I live as a responsible self in a world and country in which Christianity is still a dominant force, which demands that I take up responsibility for my own formation in this tradition and thus I continue in these waters—harnessing their power and possibility for new birth and functioning as a tributary of life for all persons. See: H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (1963; repr., Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999).

in Christ continued to hold and nurture me as I grew up. In fact, the notion of God as love and of love as being the truest essence of the divine remains my primary theological affirmation.

My spiritual tradition brought with it complications related to defining love and delineating what it looked like. While there was much beauty in my formative faith experiences, there was also significant violence—for I was raised as a fundamentalist Christian. The gender roles and the rigidity of their enforcement in my community were enacted all around me with devastating effect. And though naming its theology as being grounded in “God’s love,” much of the imbued theology was rooted in violence and, in a way, hatred of humanity on account of our sin.⁶

Legalism and shame related to bodies (particularly those marked female) and sexuality were pervasive ideological norms. Routinely throughout my childhood, the body was preached as being the source of all sin; the “flesh” would lead one into temptation and then straight to hell. It was clear that women *in particular* were the source and bearers of these fleshly temptations; our bodies were somehow particularly fleshy, causing men to “fall into sin.” Thus, as the logic goes, it was necessary that women be barred from preaching or any leadership in the family or the church...lest we of the weaker sex should open the door to evil.⁷ While I did not know at the

⁶ To discover more of the fundamentalist evangelical tradition in which I was raised see (for instance): Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liverlight Press, 2020); Chrissy Stroop and Lauren O’Neal, *Empty the Pews: Stories of Leaving the Church* (Indianapolis: Epiphany Press, 2019); William G. McLoughlin, *The American Evangelicals, 1800-1900: An Anthology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968); and Frances Fitzgerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017).

⁷ The strange paradox in fundamentalist white Christianity in the US is that women are both the “weaker sex” and are often heralded as the pure ones who must remain protected from the evils of the public sphere, on the other hand women are also temptresses with profound potential power over men. See: Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2021); and Rachel Held Evans, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood: How a Liberated Woman Found Herself Sitting on Her Roof, Covering Her Head, and Calling Her Husband “Master”* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012). For more on

time what all this meant or its legacy in my life, these realities deeply impacted me and have been the gestational spaces for my feminist resistance that I seek to embody to this day.

In addition to these particular theological and communal norms, I was raised under the shadow of the Moral Majority, which meant that my religious formation was deeply political. To be Christian was to be Republican, “pro-life,” and “pro-family values.” Our church was activist and clear in its positions. When I was in elementary school, one of our church elders gave an announcement during the service, inviting people to go protest at a local abortion clinic. It was clear that “these women” (those seeking abortions) were monsters, hell-bent on murdering innocent children. My accounting of this history is to make clear how hatred of women, the demonization of our bodies, and the trenchant focus on “sexual purity” made my community such that though I have long loved the water of love and life that my Christian spirituality affords me, I have necessarily also long worked to resist particular theological notions of my community of origin. My dissertation is a continuation of my life’s work of both disputation and constructive reshaping of dominant White Christian Evangelical theological imaginations.⁸

the history of this belief and the “Cult of True Womanhood,” see: Nancy F. Cott, *History of Women in the United States*, vol. 4, part 1, *Domestic Ideology and Domestic Work: Historical Articles on Women’s Lives and Activities*, 1992; repr., Munich, Germany: K. G Saur, 2012).

⁸ I write this with the deep awareness that my tradition (white American Evangelicalism) is not the only norm for Christianity in the United States, but it is *the* dominant imagination about Christianity in our country. For more on the history of white evangelicalism and its formation of a church that needs to be critiqued and constructed. See: Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long*; Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). For more on the legacy of the sexual purity movement inside of Evangelicalism, see the seminal text of this movement: Joshua Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 1997). Then see critiques of this movement both from Harris and others: Emily Joy Allison, *#ChurchToo: How Purity Culture Upholds Abuse and How to Find Healing* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2021); Linda Kay Klein, *Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement That Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free* (New York: Atia Press, 2018); and Michael Tennant, “Josh Harris, ‘I Kissed Dating Goodbye’ Author, Kisses Wife, Christianity Goodbye,” *The New American*, July 29, 2019, <https://thenewamerican.com/josh-harris-i-kissed-dating-goodbye-author-kisses-wife-christianity-goodbye/>.

A final thread that brings me to this work is the legacy and centrality of my own persistent ethical questions. For as long as I can remember, the rudimentary theological concepts that God made everyone (through theological anthropology, the tradition of *Imago Dei*, or the principle of human dignity), and God loves everyone, impressed upon me a deep valuation of human rights and human dignity. Simplistically this meant that when I was a kid and my two best friends (who were sisters) would fight with one another and yell, “I hate you!” I would start crying. I cried because hatred felt like a profound act of violence in the face of God’s love. Though I did not have the language for it then, these gestational ethics have now grown into that which I articulate as a belief that through creation each person is imbued with human dignity. This demands that we live as responsible selves and honor the dignity of others, for to know oneself as loved by God ought to elicit a response and embodiment of an ethics of love that seeks the well-being of all other created beings.⁹

These ethical commitments supported me throughout my coming of age. They showed themselves in my early moral positions and decisions. For instance, even though every woman in my community of faith (excepting my mother and grandmother) all stayed home and homeschooled their children, going by names such as Mrs. Feyereisen (heaven forbid you would call one of them by their first name!), I was always drawn to women who, like my grandma, had their own professional jobs and money.¹⁰ Although I lacked the language to fully articulate or apprehend my reactions to the norms of my community, it was in view of these norms that I

⁹ Importantly, this also includes all of creation.

¹⁰ Though I did not have language at the time for it, I was reacting to how these women seemed to inhabit one dominant identity: mother. In this way, they ceased to be layered, complex people who had selves that were visible and autonomous in the public sphere.

decided early in elementary school that I was never going to marry or be a mother. What my internal young commitments were responding to was (as I came to have language to explain during college thanks to Simone de Beauvoir) the profound “otherization” and erasure of women through marriage and family life demanded in my religious community. I wanted no part of this self-abnegation. I wanted to lead. Even more so, I just wanted to *be*.¹¹

This longing and desire for the being and becoming of all humans (including myself) along with my nascent ethical impulses took deeper root in junior high as I learned about the rise of National Socialism and the genocide of Jewish persons (along with others) during World War II. I voraciously devoured every book I could find on the topic, in attempt to understand what happened. I was haunted by the question of *how did this happen?* How could humans look at one another in the face and treat each other this way? My favorite movies, the fiction I read, and even my own piano compositions wrestled with these questions.¹²

This is where my budding feminism would have (and now has) found affirmation in feminist thinkers such as Valerie Saiving and Judith Plaskow who critiqued Reinhold Niebuhr’s conception of man’s (*sic*) ability to be more loving and just in the personal than in the political, because I couldn’t understand the violence of one person against another that was rendered

¹¹ It was not until I was in college that I began to realize that I was not, contrary to what I was told growing up, the first person to think that women being treated as equal persons should be a given. I will forever be indebted to the Women’s Studies program at the University of Minnesota-Duluth and Drs. Njoki Kamau and Beth Bartlett for their investment in my life. Dr. Bartlett introduced me to the work of Simone de Beauvoir and *The Second Sex* my senior year of college. I felt singled to read thoughts I had dared to think in my own head. Though it would take me some time to integrate and face the “deviant” longing I had for being and becoming an author of my own life, the gestational seeds of freedom were cultivated through this reading. See: Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Shelia Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011).

¹² When I was 13 I wrote an eight part piano composition about *Kristal Nacht* (the night of broken glass).

possible under Nazism.¹³ This question of how humans can inflict such violence upon one another even when we are faced with the other before us remains essential for my ethical reflection and striving. What does it mean to not see or to see one another? Indeed, what does it mean to recognize the other as human? Thus, this dissertation turns to the theology that was birthed in the aftermath of WWII: New Political Theology and its struggle with questions akin to those that I have long asked from my own location in time, in view of my gender and experience of it, within my religious community, my particular race and culture, in my country, and in this historical moment.

I believe, as is the case with the many political theologians whom I will reference and converse with throughout this dissertation, that the real of our lives and our embodied experiences matter, that the personal is profoundly political, that human subjectivity and flourishing is vital, and that fostering a world that honors life is a central task of theology, for theological imagination must support and give rise to greater human flourishing, or it must be silent. Additionally, I follow in the tradition of the New Political Theology because I have known the ruptures that demand a critical theological ethics.¹⁴ I have known it not only in my

¹³ For a wonderful exploration of the varied critiques of Niebuhr from feminists such as Valerie Saiving and Judith Plaskow see: Luping Huang, *Women and Pride* (Cumbria, England: Langham Press, 2018); Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (New York: University Press of America, 1980); and Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, eds. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (New York: Harper & Row, 1992), 25-42.

¹⁴ I will name and turn to these sources in the subsequent chapters but here, in naming a "critical theological ethics," I explicitly follow Hille Haker. Haker writes of her model: "Furthermore, as a Christian ethics, critical political ethics embraces the critique of political and ecclesial practices that contradict the theological understanding of freedom as liberation toward justice. Critical political ethics will therefore critique any interpretation, any norms, structures and institutions that prevent individuals from actualizing and practicing their moral agency, and it will critique any authoritarian justification of morality which transforms political/ecclesial power into the power over moral agents. Critical political ethics critiques any subjection and oppression in the name of freedom and liberation, grounding its claims in the human dignity and human rights of every human being, the protection of which ought to

personal story but also believe that such a rupture must be taken up inside of the white Christian American theological imagination and be reckoned with more deeply in view of the legacies of the genocide of native persons, enslavement and torture of black persons, and the history and present proliferation of white supremacy in the United States. Indeed, white Christianity must be confronted by these reckonings in order to speak in our time and context.¹⁵ Thus, I write this dissertation in the midst of American Christian Nationalism's creation of the horror that has been fealty to Donald Trump and the rising public re-embrace of white supremacy under the banner of Christianity. I write from Minneapolis as a child of the city where George Floyd (most recently Amir Locke amongst other black citizens) was murdered, sparking a global uprising against white supremacy. This ethics of formation is my attempt to articulate a theology that gives an account in view of history and my own presence in and responsibility to and in it, to develop an ethics of formation that can aid white American Christians in being and becoming Christian.¹⁶

The Work of the Minister and a Feminist Political Theological Ethics of Formation

My path to becoming a minister was not linear. Had I been raised in another tradition, I believe that I would have known I wanted to be a pastor since I was five years old (as this is the

be the responsibility of any moral agent and any institution...critical political ethics is necessarily connected to a hermeneutical theology, a theory of understanding, interpretation, and translation." See: Hille Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*, 297. Said alternatively: "Political ethics is critical not because it privileges some experiences over others but because it critiques ethical approaches that do not account for the differences in the accountability for suffering, the capability to change it, and the shared responsibilities." *Ibid.*, 382.

¹⁵ While I believe that this is a task for all white Christians to take up, this project speaks most specifically to white evangelicals both because they are the most dominant Christian tradition in the United States and because they are my people.

¹⁶ George Floyd was killed on May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis, MN. Officer Derek Chauvin pinned him to the ground, placing a knee on his neck as Floyd struggled to breathe for 8 minutes and 46 seconds until his death. News of his extra-judicial killing sparked global protests against racism and violence against black persons. See: "Killing of George Floyd," Wikipedia, accessed March 2, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Killing_of_George_Floyd.

time when I began lining up my dolls and preaching to them like Pastor Greg). However, this imagination was not allowed to me in a world where girls disappeared into being Mrs.

Something-or-Other; women were to be silent and submissive.

While pathways to self-actualization were not open to me as a person assigned female at birth, Evangelicalism values the fervor of zealous children, and I was nothing if not an earnest and ardent follower of Jesus, so in many ways I existed in a non-sexed/minimal sexed space where I was mostly identified by my faith up until the point when I was clearly becoming read by others as a young woman. Through reaching for performative androgyny, which was connected to my own experience of my gender as non-binary, I was able to lead in my youth group, and never dated so as to not become categorized as other/female and worked hard to eschew the gendered restrictions in my community.¹⁷ But as such, my pathway to becoming a minister was circuitous and has since been rife with pain and struggle.

It was only after significant deconstruction of my faith and work in therapy that I first and finally became a pastor at First Covenant Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota.¹⁸ I am grateful for the space provided by First Covenant and the ways it allowed me to try on the role of pastor.¹⁹

The moment it became clear to me that this was the work I wanted to do longer-term was when I

¹⁷ What I am getting at here is that though I was assigned female at birth and was coded as female while coming of age, I tried to appear to be as non-female as possible (operating in the binary system, recognizing I couldn't and wouldn't be seen as a boy, I internalized that the "less female" I appeared, the greater chance I had to be able to do public ministry.

¹⁸ I had volunteered and led in church roles since elementary school and was an associate youth director when I was in college but was not an official pastor until I was 35.

¹⁹ I am especially grateful for this as First Covenant was the church where my grandma was raised. Her family had joined the church soon after immigrating from Sweden and both my Great-Grandma Josephine Klopp and Great Aunt Pearl Peterson were buried as members of the church. Thus, having First Covenant be the place for my own healing journey and emergence into my work as a minister was a great gift to me.

went with a young woman from our congregation to the Ramsey County Courthouse as she filed an order of protection against the man who had sexually assaulted her. Another survivor met her at the courthouse and the woman said to the other: “This is Sara. She’s my pastor. You can trust her. She’ll believe you.” In that moment I knew there was no other work I desired to do in the world but to be named pastor and, as such, to be a person of safety and solidarity with those who suffered and longed for recognition from their religious community.

My work as a pastor was shaped by my doctoral studies and other efforts in activism and justice as I sought to help First Covenant move toward deeper inclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons and work on dismantling white supremacy. Yet, it was in the wake of the 2016 election when the people of my birth and adolescent formation—namely, white suburban evangelicals—made possible the presidency of Donald Trump, that I began to consider more deeply how I might be called to show up, in view of my history and identities, to do what I could to foster the beloved community.²⁰ These questions led me back to the suburbs that formed me, back to a white church that had not leaned into taking up the work of racial justice or LGBTQIA+ inclusion but one with just enough openness that perhaps I could help to build and foster bridges toward justice as a minister at a congregation named Colonial Church.²¹

Not only is my work that of feminist ethics as it exists in critical relationship with the Christian tradition, but my embodied presence as only the third female minister at Colonial, and

²⁰ My work is deeply shaped by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King’s vision of “The Beloved Community.” To read more, see: “The Beloved Community,” The King Center, accessed March 2, 2021, <https://thekingcenter.org/about-tkc/the-king-philosophy/>.

²¹ I will share more about this in the conclusion, but as of December 2021, the church voted to change our name to Meetinghouse Church.

the first who has a significant preaching and leadership profile, is important to my work.²² The gendered experience of my body impacts how I am heard and received.

I see and understand my work as a minister to largely be the work of formation. I often speak of this as my call to be a “midwife of freedom,” aiding persons in their own becoming and also in the work of helping to usher forth new communal becoming in the great Exodus tradition.²³ Additionally, I think of my pastoral work in terms of what psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott and social worker Clare Winnicott each named the “holding environment.”²⁴ By tending to my own work and ethical formation, I seek to invite and curate space for the being and continual becoming of the community I am leading. As I will make clear through the subsequent

²² My yearly preaching numbers 2018:12 times; 2019: 14 times; 2020: 16 times; 2021: 19 times; 2021: 3 months of parental leave and now 14 times and counting.

²³ This is an example of feminist praxis and counter to the traditional role of pastor in a community of faith.

²⁴ Donald Winnicott was a British psychoanalyst who wrote on object relations theory and argued the holding environment provided for the infant by the mother and is a vital space for their development. This theory translated to an understanding that in psychoanalysis the therapeutic space is vital for the client to safely explore potentially overwhelming feelings. For some of the original outlining of his work see: Donald Winnicott, *The Child, The Family and the Outside World* (1964; repr. New York: Perseus, 1987); Donald Winnicott, *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (New York: International Universities Press, 1965). Though he is credited with this concept, in truth, his work was deeply influenced and shaped by his spouse, Clare Winnicott. As a social worker she actually first wrote on the “holding environment” in her paper “Casework Techniques in the Child Care Services.” She notes: “(Social workers provide) a reliable medium within which people can find themselves or that part of themselves about which they are uncertain. We become, so to speak, a reliable environment, which is what they so much need—reliable in time and place; and we take great trouble to be where we have said we would be at the right time . . . We can “hold” the idea of him (*sic*) in our relationship so that when he sees us he can find that bit of himself again which he has given us. This is conveyed by the way in which we remember details and know exactly where we left him in the last interview.... If we can hold the painful experience, recognizing its importance and not turning aside from it as the client relives it with us . . . we help him to have the courage to feel its full impact; only as he can do that will his own natural healing processes be liberated.” From Clare Britton (later Winnicott), “Casework Techniques in the Child Care Services,” *Social Casework* 36 (1955): 3–13. For a wonderful and honest acknowledgement of their relationship and the influence of Clare’s work on Donald’s (which most of psychoanalytic theory ignores), see: Joel Kanter, “The Untold Story of Clare and Donald Winnicott: How Social Work Influenced Modern Psychoanalysis,” in *Institute for Clinical Social Work* 28, no. 3 (2000): 245-261. For further wonderful discussion of the legacy of Winnicott’s work in conversation with Bowlby and Benjamin, see: Lydia K. Borg, “Holding, Attaching and Relating: A Theoretical Perspective on Good Enough Therapy Through Analysis of Winnicott’s Good Enough Mother, Using Bowlby’s Attachment Theory and Relational Theory” (master’s thesis, Smith College, 2013), <https://scholarworks.smith.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1665&context=theses>.

pages, I see the work of ministering as a contextual embodied feminist political theological ethics: the work of cultivating a Christianity capable of speaking and acting justly in the face of American Christian Nationalism and resurgent white supremacy within Christianity. And so I come to this work, employing my body and my presence as a preacher as a feminist political act toward justice and more livability. Additionally, as a feminist ethicist, as a body assigned female at birth, it is important to note that Colonial Church is a congregational church, and I deeply feel a sense of connection and responsibility to the witches tried and killed during the Colonial period of congregationalism in the US and see my work as that of solidarity with them for, indeed, I am one of the seeds of the witches that they burned and tried to bury.²⁵

Colonial Church of Edina: A Historical and Political Account of Place

In January of 2018 I started my time as a minister at Colonial Church in Edina, Minnesota.²⁶ As a teen, I knew about Colonial Church both on account of its influence in the Twin Cities Southwest Metro and because of my propensity for systems thinking about the church writ large. I knew its legacy, context, and “issues” with their senior ministers. Coming of age as a Baptist fundamentalist Evangelical, I knew it was a “liberal” church, because they had

²⁵ With my wording here I am referencing the frequent saying in activist communities: “They tried to bury us, but they didn’t know we were seeds.” It seems that this quote originates from poem by Greek poet Dinos Christianopoulos. See: An Xiao, “On the Origins of ‘They Tried to Bury Us, They Didn’t Know We Were Seeds,’” *Hyperallergic*, July 3, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/449930/on-the-origins-of-they-tried-to-bury-us-they-didnt-know-we-were-seeds/>. For more on the Salem Witch Trials, specifically in view of the socio-religious context, see: Emerson W. Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft: The Salem Trials and the American Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil’s Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002); Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974). Note: I am also deeply aware that I am the child of the ones who lived and killed the witches and this is part of my work and responsibility to take up this history.

²⁶ It is important to me to note that though my dissertation topic is now focused on my work in the church, I did not come to the church to write this dissertation. In fact, I was originally working on sexual violence, trauma, and memory but ended up switching my topic to the current effort once I had already been at the church for two years.

women in leadership and valued the life of the mind.²⁷ And here I suddenly was, a newly ordained minister of a church with not only a particularly storied presence in the Twin Cities community, but one connected to larger themes and intersections of faith, politics, and community formation that bear witness to the larger struggles in the country.

With roots going back to 1902, Colonial Church was birthed in the post-war landscape of Edina, Minnesota.²⁸ In the 30s, community leaders decided that there needed to be a new Congregational Church to serve this burgeoning suburb, and thus the church was founded in 1946 in the Country Club neighborhood of Edina.²⁹ Let me say a few things about the history of the Village of Edina and then some about the reasoning for the selection of its name (both the physical location of being formed in the Country Club neighborhood of Edina *and* the name and

²⁷ As recorded in the 50-year history of the church, Darlene Stensby was the first woman ordained as a part of the staff in 1983. Women had been a part of the ministry efforts and staff for years though. In 1982 it is noted that “four out of eleven of the permanent ministry staff are women.” (see: Lorelei Bergman et al., *The Colonial Church of Edina: A Look at Fifty Years 1946-1996* (Edina, MN: Colonial Church, 1996), 23. Available as Appendix B.

²⁸ The church history traces back to the formation of Union Church of Edina on June 8, 1902. According to the Church's 50th anniversary historiography: "In 1904 Union Church purchased Lots 10 and 11, Block 5, Crock's First Addition, from William F. Bowers of San Francisco for \$200.00. The congregation first borrowed \$500. 00 and later \$400.00 from the Congregational Building Society and erected a frame. In 1932, the church building was abandoned, and services were held in the new Wooddale School at 50th Street and Wooddale Avenue in Edina. In 1941, the Minneapolis Congregational Union commenced discussions of its rights and responsibilities in rapidly growing Edina. A Union appointed committee, in 1941, was charged with the job of investigating the possibility of a church in Edina under the direction of the Rev. Nels F. Nordstrom, Director of the Minneapolis Congregational Union. On April 13, 1944, the first meeting of the Wooddale Avenue Committee was held.... A church survey of Edina south of 50th Street was authorized. The survey results were favorable. The state superintendent was instructed to search for and recommend a minister to enter the field. ... 1946: It was at this time that the Rev. Kenneth E. Seim was chosen to bring into reality a new church in Edina." The original purpose statement read: "The Colonial Church of Edina is a community church of the people. It is a church welcoming all in worship, a church offering friendship and the happy companionship of kindly folk to all who gather in common interest. It is a church of our children, our families and our neighbors, for only by service to all the people of this community can the fullest good be derived." See: *Ibid.*, 1-2.

²⁹ I will say more about the significance about being founded in the Country Club neighborhood later, but this locatedness is vital in understanding the challenges to my work in the church. See: Section 8, "Edina Country Club Covenant," City of Edina, accessed August 3, 2020, https://web.archive.org/web/20150205034540/http://edinamn.gov/edinamn/files/Advisory_Boards/Heritage_Board/Heritage_Landmarks/Deed-Restriction-4524-Casco-Ave-1_4-15-1925.pdf

reasoning for the name itself will feature heavily in my work in this dissertation). But first to the history of the land that is now called Edina, Minnesota.

The city of Edina is located on stolen Dakhóta (Dakota) land.³⁰ The Dakota people's cultural history begins at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers, a sacred place called Bdóte.³¹ To try and name the history of this land demands an acknowledgement that the granting of statehood to the land of my birth (accomplished in 1858 during the lead up to the US Civil War) was predicated upon genocide and erasure of Native persons.³² Native activist Jim Bear Jacobs recently reminded me of this history: that it was during the granting of statehood and participation in the Civil War, in the becoming a place for black persons to experience freedom from slavery via migration from the south up the Mississippi River to Minnesota, that *at the same time* white Minnesotans engaged in the Dakota war, exiled Native Minnesotans to concentration camps at Fort Snelling and Camp Lincoln, and in 1863 expelled all Dakota persons from the state.³³ Naming this fraught history is important both because it is true and because the

³⁰ You can discover what land you live on by visiting: <https://native-land.ca> ("Native Land Map," Native Land Digital, accessed March 3, 2021, <https://native-land.ca>). In Appendix A I have included an Indigenous Land Acknowledgement to name my own locatedness on stolen land. In the account that I give in this section, I am especially indebted to my colleague Molly Greening who, upon review of an earlier draft of this chapter, invited me to name more of the prehistory of the land, especially if I wish to write a critical political ethics that is de-colonial view of my working at a church named Colonial. To learn more about Indigenous Land Acknowledgment, visit: "Indigenous Land Acknowledgment," Native Governance Center, accessed March 3, 2021, <https://nativegov.org/a-guide-to-indigenous-land-acknowledgment>.

³¹ This confluence of the waters is thought to be the birthplace of the people, the origin of life. For more on the history of the Dakota in Minnesota, see: Samuel W. Pond and Gary C. Anderson, *Dakota Life in the Upper Midwest* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1986). See also: "Native Nations of Minnesota," Minnesota Humanities Center, accessed March 3, 2021, <https://mnhum.org/native-nations-minnesota/>.

³² Historian Chad Montrie names this as the state's "the first racial exclusion." Chad Montrie, "'A Bigoted, Prejudiced, Hateful Little Area': The Making of an All-White Suburb in the Deep North." *Journal of Urban History* 45, no. 2 (2019): 5.

³³ Following the granting of statehood in 1858, Minnesota was one of the earliest states to volunteer to fight with the Union in the US Civil War. While growing up in Minnesota I learned, with pride, about the role that Minnesota

reach for a feminist political ethics in my work at Colonial Church in Edina, Minnesota requires a multi-layered critical historical analysis.³⁴

Edina's settler history traces back to the mid-1850s when the land to the west of Fort Snelling began to be settled as Richfield Township.³⁵ On the land that now constitutes the cities of Richfield and Edina there were many farms including a Quaker settlement that was founded

played in holding the hill in Gettysburg in 1863 until reinforcements arrived, thus securing a change in the tide of the war which led to an eventual Union victory. However, at the same time while white Minnesotans were fighting for the Union, white settlers and US troops in Minnesota continued to encroach upon Native lands, dehumanizing and killing Native persons. Treaty after treaty was broken and the Dakota people responded with force, leading to the US-Dakota war of 1862. After the capture of Dakota warriors, 38 of them were publicly lynched in December of 1862. Additionally, Native women, children, and elders from many tribes (irrespective of if they had participated in the uprising), were forcibly expelled to an internment camp at Fort Snelling. Subsequent to this, further moves were made to eradicate the Dakota people from Minnesota via the Dakota Expulsion Act of 1863. So, while Dakota people were being forcibly removed from their native lands, Black persons were migrating north in search of freedom in the "land of cloudy waters" (the native name for Minnesota). Of course, this does not mean that black settlers were welcomed with open arms, for the machinations of white supremacy are many-faced. Yet it is important to note that the founding of Edina as a Quaker community consisting of black and white settlers was predicated upon the removal of native persons from their homeland. For more on the 1st regiment's role in Gettysburg see: "1st Minnesota Infantry Regiment," Wikipedia, accessed March 2, 2021, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1st_Minnesota_Infantry_Regiment. For more on the US-Dakota war, see: Kenneth Carley, *The Dakota War of 1862: Minnesota's Other Civil War* (1976; repr., St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2001); Minnesota Board of Commissioners on Publishing, *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1861-1865*, vol. 1 (Charleston, SC: Andesite Press, 2017). Gary Clayton Anderson and Alan R. Woolworth, eds., *Through Dakota Eyes: Narrative Accounts of The Minnesota Indian War Of 1862* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1988); "US-Dakota War of 1862," Minnesota Historical Society, accessed March 3, 2021. <https://www.usdakotawar.org>. For more on the breaking of the US-MN Native community treaties, see: "Minnesota Treaty Interactive," Minnesota Historical Society, accessed March 3, 2021, <https://www.usdakotawar.org/history/treaties/minnesota-treaty-interactive>. For more on the internment camp at Fort Snelling and the aftermath of the War of 1862, see: "Forced Marches and Imprisonment," Minnesota Historical Society, accessed March 3, 2021, <https://www.usdakotawar.org/history/aftermath/forced-marches-imprisonment>; "Trials and Hanging," Minnesota Historical Society, accessed March 3, 2021: <https://www.usdakotawar.org/history/aftermath/trials-hanging>. For more on the history of the African American community in Minnesota see: Tina Burnside, "African Americans in Minnesota," *MNOpedia* (published by the Minnesota Historical Society), accessed March 3, 2021, <https://www.mnopedia.org/african-americans-minnesota>. See also Montrie, 5-6. Note: I am especially grateful to Jim Bear Jacobs for his friendship and for making clear this connection to me.

³⁴ For an exploration of the impact of Christian mission on the Dakota people during this time see: Linda M. Clemmons, *The Conflicted Mission: Faith, Disputes, and Deception on the Dakota Frontier* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 2014).

³⁵ This section is indebted to the work of Deborah Morse-Kahn and also to the excellent scholarship of Chad Montrie. See: Deborah Morse-Kahn, *Edina: Chapters in the City History* (Edina, MN: Edina Historical Society, 1998); and Chad Montrie, "'A Bigoted, Prejudiced, Hateful Little Area,'" 300–320.

near the end of the Civil War whose community was comprised of freed slaves and free Black persons along with white settlers. Irish families who emigrated to Minnesota as a result of the potato famine in the 1870s settled in the area as well in the region later known as the Cahill district, and the eventual city name of Edina came about on account of a Scottish immigrant who originally hailed from Edinburgh and named his new home in honor of his heritage.³⁶ Though emerging from these more humble and diverse settler farming communities and a progressive political history, Edina eventually became an idyllic witness to the emergent white middle class of the 1950s and 1960s, rife with the prestige of a newly formed, intentionally curated upper-class white community...one that was predicated upon intentional racial and ethnic exclusion.³⁷

³⁶ Morse-Kahn, *Edina*, 16 and 30. There were seventeen Irish families who settled in the area, including the Delaney family who built the first settler home in what later became Edina in 1854 (Ibid., 18). There is some debate about the history of the Quaker community and the black settlers of Edina, but it is clear that the Edina Mills area was home to many black families (at least seventeen) who settled in the area and lived there up until their forced erasure on account of the development of the Country Club neighborhood by Samuel Thorpe. Read more about the Country Club district in Ibid., 59-60 and 90-96. As Morse-Kahn notes: "Most importantly, Samuel Thorpe's Country Club District would prove to be the critical factor, the one significant event, the reason that Edina is known today as a suburb of exclusivity and wealth." (Ibid., 96). Though this was an inevitability post-development of the Country Club and other racist housing covenants, but it was bolstered by the development of the first indoor mall in the world: Southdale. Through these movements Edina came into national preeminence as the ideal post-war white upper-class community that the burgeoning post-war middle-class world could aspire to. See: Ibid., 129-140.

³⁷ Even up until today Edina has a bad reputation for trenchant racism (though I'd argue it is unfairly scapegoated because racism and racist policies have been part of the landscape throughout Minnesota). From being proudly known as a "sundowner town" to neighborhood covenants designed to exclude black, brown, and Jewish people, turning toward its racist history is work that has only more recently been a part of the city's civic efforts. Montrie also highlights the racist minstrel shows that were hosted by the Guild of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church from the the 1930s-1950s. He writes of this: "This performance, and the many other annual minstrel shows that continued there into the mid-1950s, helped complete the suburb's racial transformation, wiping whites' collective memory clean of the preceding interracial area and justifying racial exclusion without violating pretensions to gentility." (See Montrie, "'A Bigoted, Prejudiced, Hateful Little Area,'" 2). This is especially interesting to me in view of the fact that Edina was formed on land that, as Edina historian Deborah Morse-Kahn has written, was a Quaker Village that was built to include African American families of Civil War veterans and freed slaves. Edina's history includes significant black families such as the Yanceys and Gillespies (Morse-Kahn, *Edina*, 19). Ellen Yancey helped found the first Parent Teacher Association in Edina and served as its first president (Montrie, "'A Bigoted, Prejudiced, Hateful Little Area,'" 7; and Morse-Kahn, *Edina*, 61). Additionally, in 1898 general election, J. Franklin Wheaton, an African American, was elected to the Minnesota House of Representatives representing District 42, which included all of Edina. Then Charles (C.B.) Yancey was from one of the prominent black families and served as the village clerk of Edina from 1912-1920 and served as the registrar of deeds for Hennepin County until his retirement (Ibid., 62). For further history of the Black settlers of Edina see: Morse-Kahn, *Edina*, 55-62. I also love the history

It is here that I want to name that the emergence of Edina as the idyllic dream of post-war WASP life was not a historical fact but an intentionally curated reality, achieved first by the erasure of native persons from the land and then the expulsion of black and Jewish families in the 1930s.³⁸

The development of Edina into the dream of white suburbia—an upper-middle class Pleasantville—succeeded so totally that it this was *the* stereotype of Edina that I grew up knowing (even as I am a white Minnesotan). The so-called “cake-eaters” of Minnesota were hated by all of the rest of us “normal” people, us “good white Scandinavians” who resided in the surrounding cities and suburbs.³⁹ The realities of the suburban/urban divide, racial covenants,

of the Grimes Family who were White progressives. Henry David Thoreau visited them in 1861 and spent time walking the lakes and creek with their family, discussing abolitionism, pacifism, and transcendental spirituality (Ibid., 47-49). For more on the racist and racialized history of Edina see: Morse-Kahn, *Edina*; Mary Jane Smetanka, “Edina’s Historical Mystery of Black Flight,” *Star Tribune*, January 1, 2013, <https://www.startribune.com/edina-s-historical-mystery-black-flight/184985461/>; James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism* (Touchstone: New York, 2005); Charles A. Gallagher and Cameron D. Lippard, “Sundowner Towns,” in *Race & Racism in the United States: An Encyclopedia of the American Mosaic*, vol. 3 (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 2014), 1207-1208. For an example of the Edina Country Club Covenant, see: City of Edina, Section 8. Deborah Morse-Kahn, whose family was Jewish and was impacted by the racist covenants in Edina, highlighted the racist legacy in her book. She writes about how the community was indeed a left-leaning farm community before the country club development (Morse-Kahn, *Edina*). See, also: John Reinan, “Edina’s Racist Past is a Focal Point in Wikipedia ‘Edit War’,” *Star Tribune*, February 5, 2015, <https://www.startribune.com/edina-s-racist-past-is-focus-of-wikipedia-edit-war/290835531/?refresh=true>.

³⁸ In naming what I do in this section, I am mindful of Richard Rothstein’s argument in *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* that segregation is not a *de facto* reality, but one made through *de jure*... it was through laws and policy decisions passed by local, state, and federal governments that Edina was MADE white...and if it was made to be white, it may also be unmade...which is a central part of my effort in my work as a minister at Colonial Church. See; Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Norton & Co, 2017). This is also the point made by Montrie about Edina. See: Montrie, ““A Bigoted, Prejudiced, Hateful Little Area,”” 7. What is both interesting and so sad to me is to note that even the original settlers did not fit into the WASP imaginations of post-war America: they were Scottish and Irish and many were Catholic. This is an example of how people can be “made white” and highlights the differences between what happened to the historic black residents versus the historic white residents of Edina.

³⁹ Minnesotans have recently been challenged to confront these self-congratulatory narratives and the easy scapegoating of Edina neighbors in view of the realities of some of the most trenchant gaps between wealth and education of black and white people being found in Minnesota and the string of violence against blacks in Minneapolis and St. Paul at the hands of our police forces. To read more about this see (for instance): Greg Rosalsky, “Minneapolis Ranks Near the Bottom for Racial Equality,” *National Public Radio (NPR)*, June 2, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/money/2020/06/02/867195676/minneapolis-ranks-near-the-bottom-for-racial-equality>.

policing, and Minnesota hockey legacies were all depicted and given national exposure through the *Mighty Ducks* movie trilogy of the mid-1990s: Adam Banks of Edina, Minnesota and his family reflected the worst of privilege and monied excess that the rest of us “progressive white people” could look down on. Edina was always a part of us, and in some ways we knew it *was* us, but its existence allowed the rest of us white Minnesotans to believe that our Scandinavian humility meant we were insulated from the haughty problems of the lily white, privileged rich people in Edina who we all secretly called “the worst.”⁴⁰

The realities of the formation of Edina into what it would become, though unfair in the scapegoating of it as the uniquely racist and privileged part of the otherwise progressive metropolis (for indeed, racial covenants also existed in Minneapolis neighborhoods and the city where I live, St. Louis Park has a high concentration of Jewish people because they were prohibited by these covenants from buying homes in Edina *and* South Minneapolis), yet the stereotypes about Edina also speak to something about its recent history and demographics. It is, and has long been, a wealthy suburb, with a history of political conservatism and problematic policing, realities which all shape how the church, originally named Colonial Church of Edina (then just Colonial Church and now Meetinghouse Church), was both experienced by the broader community and how it understood itself as a powerful agent for leadership and influence around

Also, the state of Minnesota tracks this information. See: “Racial Disparities,” State of Minnesota Employment and Economic Development, accessed April 7, 2022, <https://mn.gov/deed/data/lmi-reports/racial-disparities/>.

⁴⁰ As noted in the prior footnote, Edina reputation as being the embodiment of white suburban ideals was not just local but was and remains national in both academic literature and pop culture. See, for instance: *The Mighty Ducks*, directed by Stephen Herek (Buena Vista Pictures, 1992), VHS). Growing up, one of the jokes about what EDINA stood for was: “Every Day I Need Attention.” In his work on whiteness and Edina, Montrie precisely argues that part of the resistance to integration and racial diversity is “buttressed by attempts to write race out of our city’s past, to suggest that geographic segregation had somehow happened on its own, without purpose or intent.” (Montrie, “A Bigoted, Prejudiced, Hateful Little Area,” 17). It is thus only by turning to our history that change can occur.

the world.⁴¹

What is in a Name? Colonial Church

To the name: Colonial Church. There are two significant reasons that the name was selected. The first is that as a Congregational church, the name refers to this period of early immigration by the Pilgrims, which birthed the Congregational tradition in the United States. And this church understood/understands itself as deeply connected to the Pilgrim tradition.⁴²

The Pilgrims traveled to the Americas in 1620 and settled in Plymouth, MA.⁴³ The Pilgrims were a separatist Protestant group, and the name Colonial was chosen in part to evoke the principles and congregational beliefs central to Pilgrim self-understanding. This tradition is highlighted in a variety of ways in the church, including the campus itself (the second campus)

⁴¹ I will say more about the church name change in the conclusion.

⁴² For more on the congregational tradition in the United States, see: Gaius Glenn Atkins and Frederick L. Fagley, *History of American Congregationalism* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1942); Arthur A. Rouner, Jr., *The Congregational Way of Life* (Oak Creek, WI: Congregational Press, 1972); Barbara Brown Zikmund, ed., *Hidden Histories in the United Church of Christ* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1984); J. William T. Youngs, *The Congregationalists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998). For more on the Pilgrims, whose history has uniquely shaped the imagination of our congregation as a “Pilgrim People” see: William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation* (Mineola, NY: Dover Press, 2006). Nick Bunker, *Making Haste from Babylon: The Mayflower Pilgrims and Their World: A New History* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010). Nathaniel Philbrick, *Mayflower: Voyage, Community, War* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

⁴³ Though the lore in much of Pilgrim-centric history centers around Plymouth and Plymouth Rock, quite interestingly, the Pilgrims originally landed not on Plymouth Rock but in Provincetown (now Provincetown, MA). Fascinatingly, though it is historically accurate to name Provincetown as the original landing and place where the Mayflower Compact was signed, the broader community of those invested in a white-washed telling of Pilgrim history, including those in my church, do not uplift Provincetown as a central historic Pilgrim location. I wonder how much of this is tied to the current and near-recent demographic and cultural truth of Provincetown as a haven for artists and (in particular) gay men? During a visit to Provincetown during the writing of this dissertation, I was shocked to discover the role of Provincetown in Pilgrim history (I only went to visit because of the well-renowned artist community and because of its thriving GLBTQIAA+ community) and was filled with great joy and wonder at the ways in which Provincetown as a place for queer rights and life along with its being the 50-year home and birthplace for much of the wonderful poetry of Mary Oliver...representing the embodiment of the political theological vision of my work: a gestational place for freedom and justice for all people...and I wonder what if instead of Plymouth Rock, Provincetown became the location for thinking of what it means to be Christian? See the conclusion for more.

which was designed to reflect the architecture of a Colonial village with the Meetinghouse at the center of it. Additionally, church rooms are named after early Pilgrim and Puritan (non-separatist reformers) with a copy of the Mayflower Compact hanging in the North Commons (outside of the Meetinghouse), along with a supposed relic from the Mayflower ship itself. This legacy and self-understanding has been mythologized as evidenced by the continued annual Thanksgiving service in which members of the congregation dress as Pilgrims and the service liturgy follows the original Pilgrim style.⁴⁴

The second reason that the name was chosen is also rooted in the Colonial era. The church was formed in the post-war era of 1946 when patriotic fervor was heightened in the United States. The optimism and economic boom led to a desire to reaffirm the American democratic tradition steeped in a mythological retelling of and accounting for the history about the founding of our nation with a particularly Christian Nationalist bent. As noted in *The Colonial Church of Edina: A Look at Fifty Years (1946-1996)* about the history of Colonial Church, founding minister Rev. Ken Sime stated that the name was selected because:

We wanted to be a community church. We have worked toward that end...What we had in mind when we chose the name 'Colonial Church' (on March 24, 1946) were our colonial fathers, their ideals, hopes and prayers for the nation. Once we had that name, it solved our architectural problems.⁴⁵

From 4th of July services with bunting and singing of patriotic anthems (which ceased in

⁴⁴ This persists despite nearly 25 years of resistance to it by senior ministers. When I started at the church, I made clear that I would not participate in the service. My colleague Christian Collins Winn taught a class at the church on the history of congregationalism in the church and noted to me an interesting fact he discovered in his research: that such re-enactments only came into place in the 1930s-1940s as a part of the mythological re-creation of the founding of America as a particular Christian utopia. See: Margaret Bendorth, *The Last Puritans: Mainline Protestants and the Power of the Past* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 133-152.

⁴⁵ Quote from founding minister, Rev. Kenneth E. Seim. See: Bergman, *The Colonial Church of Edina*, 2.

the early 90s) to the historic positioning of the flag inside and outside of the sanctuary (the flag in the sanctuary was present until the mid-1990s), to the naming of rooms after American leaders such as Abigail Adams (wife of the second president of the United States John Adams) to copies of the Declaration of Independence, the US Constitution, and the original Bill of Rights in the North Commons of the church, there has been a historic wedding of Christianity and American Nationalism in the church.⁴⁶

I was unaware of much of this history when I joined the staff at the church. In fact, I was told the reason for the name had something to do with the Pilgrims but mostly with the affirmation of the Congregational legacy coming from Colonial New England and with the building's architecture. By the time I arrived on staff, the particularly Christian Nationalist commitments were not apparent and not embraced by the majority of newer ministers or community members. Yet these legacies remain deeply operative and haunt the congregation. They are part of what I have been and am seeking to deconstruct through my pastoral leadership in the community.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ I am grateful to Rev. Dr. Christian Collins Winn, my colleague at the church, for making this clear to me by highlighting the above quote from the founding minister, Ken Sime. Suddenly I understood what I had missed during my first year and a half at the church—the Christian Nationalism in the church with historic members is stronger than I have previously encountered in any other community of faith. See: Bergman, *The Colonial Church of Edina*, 2. I also appreciate my friend, Max Brumberg-Kraus noting how the original Pilgrims would not have had a flag when they came to America.

⁴⁷ This was never more clear than through the reaction of some of the elder members' responses when we sought to change the church's name in 2020. A Church Council member (who ended up resigning), upon hearing that the head of the Council (the moderator) was asking the Council to take up a vote about recommending the church change its name responded by saying, "I refuse to hate America." Though originally shocking to me, upon reading more about why the name Colonial was selected ("in homage to the great founding of this country") and after reflecting on the presence of the original Bill of Rights and Declaration of Independence in our North Commons (which I've never witnessed in a church) to the 4th of July services with bunting and bands, it started to make more sense: for though I grew up as a child of the Moral Majority in Baptist Fundamentalism, this church is actually the most Christian Nationalist community I have ever been a part of. For a visual of the North Common where a copy of the original Bill of Rights and Declaration of Independence are hung along on the wall and there is a replica of the Mayflower with a supposed relic from the boat enclosed therein and a commentary on our first attempt to change the name of

In addition to its location and name, another important aspect of the church is that it has a unique way of seeking to hold a “third space” for a faith that renders it neither a purely liberal mainline congregation nor purely an Evangelical conservative one. With a history of bringing together head, heart, and mind, the church had a history of holding together people of divergent political and theological commitments.⁴⁸ While I was growing up in a fundamentalist Baptist community it meant that I looked a bit askance on this very Edina “city on a hill” church because it was “liberal.” Long known for holding space for difference and a focus on the intellectual heritage of reformed congregationalism, Colonial was transformed from small neighborhood congregational community to a national leader of the church-growth movement of the 1960s-1980s. Amongst the first in the nation to have a youth pastor, this pilgrim community imagined itself called to be (as it indeed was) a leader in the national movement toward expanding suburban church communities, influencing culture and playing pivotal roles in the new post-war world.⁴⁹

The growth boom at the church entered its second chapter in 1963 when Colonial’s new senior minister was called. Arthur Rouner was the son of an east-coast congregational minister. Long admiring the congregational heritage in New England, with a desire to return to the pilgrim purity of the earliest church, he saw himself and the church as those called to be a pilgrim people

the church see: Jean Hopfensperger, “George Floyd’s Death Sparks Soul-Searching by Faith Leaders,” *Star Tribune*, March 20, 2021, <https://www.startribune.com/floyd-s-death-sparks-soul-searching-by-faith-leaders/600036713/>.

⁴⁸ This is due to many factors. One of them is that as a congregational church it is a non-credal community and is deeply committed to the conscience of the individual believer. Additionally, since it was a large congregation filled with many business leaders and featuring a well-educated congregational membership, there has been space for more intellectual wrestling and there have also been both more Evangelical and Liberal ministers on staff.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, especially 10-29. See Appendix B.

in the world.⁵⁰ The lone (or seemingly lone) Democrat to move into the Edina community of country clubs and Republicans, this firebrand young man brought his bust of JFK along with his penchant for visionary leadership, love, and pastor-centric congregational leadership.

In 1978, the community was bursting at the seams of their original campus location in the Country Club neighborhood and pilgrimaged together (in a procession, dressed in Pilgrim costumes, led by the ever-theatrical Rouser) to their new campus on the western edge of Edina, alongside of the Suburban sprawl edifice of the newly paved 62-Crosstown Highway.⁵¹ With new visibility and marketing acumen, Rouser saw an opportunity to build the church as a village that would function as a city on a hill to the surrounding community. This “village,” fashioned in the pattern of a New England colonial town, was designed with “wide streets” (hallways) through which families could flow and spiritual formation and church would transpire. And at the center of the “village,” as was the case in New England colonial communities was the heartbeat: a meetinghouse with the pulpit positioned above the congregational floor so that the word of God might be lifted high.⁵² From 1963-1990 the church continued to expand in number

⁵⁰ For more on his call to the church, see: *Ibid.*, 9-11. The 50-year history document reads that the search committee was looking for the following: "It has been the committee's aim to obtain a man who is outstanding in the pulpit and ranks high in counseling, youth leadership, religious education, program planning, administration and who has personal attributes to make him loved and respected by all. Along with this we have not overlooked the qualifications of his wife." The accounting continues, "With a laundry list such as this, it is not difficult to understand that few made it to the final judgment. One minister stood out from all the others. Arthur A. Rouser, Jr. had graduated from Harvard University in 1951, where he was captain of the freshmen rowing crew, among other activities. He also had attended Choate School in New Hampshire. The year of 1952 - 1953 was spent at New College, University of Edinburgh, Scotland. He had graduated from Union Theological Seminary in 1954." Arthur Rouser was installed as the second senior minister on January 9, 1963.

⁵¹ Though we have moved locations, I think it is important that we take up responsibility for our being founded and our first building being in the racially exclusive Country Club neighborhood.

⁵² This move was not without controversy. It took three votes for this to transpire...though this is not detailed in depth in the 50-year history document. Regarding the vote, all that is recorded is: "At a Church Meeting, it was voted to acquire a six months' option to purchase a 23-acre site at the intersection of Tracy Avenue and Highway 62 Crosstown. A new Task Force, the Colonial Guard, was to study the possibilities of a new building." Also: "In

and influence, with local, national, and international influence.⁵³

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw the dawning of a new post-church day on the horizon while, at the same time, Rouner was nearing a normative trajectory end of a career (he was at Colonial as senior minister for 32 years). Rouner's focus through the 80s had shifted more to mission work in Africa—on account of his own personal transformation experienced through traveling to Africa to help bring clean water through World Vision, and an encounter with the Holy Spirit that led to his speaking in tongues from the pulpit—such that some lay leadership met with Rouner and asked him to step down. To say that Rouner did not take this invitation well cannot be overstated, and his refusal to leave graciously deeply divided the church—scars which are felt until this day.⁵⁴

October, a Church Meeting was held in Edina West High School to look at alternative programs for Colonial Church. It was voted 295 to 129 that the new building would be at Tracy Avenue." Ibid., 18-19. There are so many particulars of the community's history and its intersection with history that are worth noting. A few of these include that Arthur Rouner continued to be a controversial figure in the more conservative Edina community: he had the church stake out a position on Vietnam that included both support of troops and also contentious objectors. In 1970, the church published that a statement that the church "has admonished its young men it will stand by them whether they choose military service or as conscientious objectors to war." Ibid., 14. The church was also involved in many efforts around racial justice and yet there were also realities of functioning like a burgeoning white suburban community and the privilege and distance and financial power that this supplied such as when in 1968 (the year that Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated), the church youth group went to Colorado instead of their usual trip to D.C. on account of potential protests and disturbances...which opened up a new moment in the youth programming that was toward a more evangelical, YoungLife model of ministry and away from a social justice identity. See: Ibid., 12-13.

⁵³ From its founding with 135 charter members in 1946, the church membership appears to have peaked in 1991 at 3,765. By 1996 membership dropped to 2,998 and is presently close to 1000 (though the rolls have not been cleaned up in nearly ten years, so the actual number is closer to 600). At its height of influence, the ministry of Colonial Church and Arthur Rouner's public profile included his being asked to speak to the high school in 1968 following the assassination of MLK, being invited to journey with World Vision to east Africa to work on issues of drought, broadcasting of the Christmas Eve Service on TV across India, and invitations to visit Washington D.C. to advise the president on matters such as Panama. See (for instance): Ibid. 13, 20, 22.

⁵⁴ Though the formal record does not name this, based upon my own conversations with members, I understand that in 1993 a group of leaders from the church met with Rouner to encourage him to forgo his role as senior minister. Over the 80s and early 90s, Rouner spent increasing amounts of his time in Africa and seemed less interested in leading the church. Rouner did not respond well to this encouragement and shortly thereafter (following this private confrontation), announced his retirement as senior minister...for nearly 1.5 years later. This began a period of deep division and pain in the church that continues up until today. As is recorded: "On the first Sunday in Lent, Arthur

In many ways, Colonial has never re-found its footing after Rouner's departure. This was complicated by the reality of the end of church growth and the age of the church itself and the ways in which suburban sprawl continued to the west in the Twin Cities. Contrary to the recommendations of any national ecclesial body, Arthur Rouner and his wife Molly remained members of the church up until his death in December 2021 (Molly is still a member), Rouner continuing to oppose current ministerial efforts at change up until his death in December of 2021.⁵⁵

Rouner offered his resignation, effective September 1, 1994... The church actually entered a period of grieving as it lost several staff through downsizing because of diminished financial resources.” Ibid., 28. Honest reflection on this transition was named in the consulting report from TAG, as a part of the ReForming process that started in the fall of 2017. In the history section they note: “Beginning in about 1992 a number of the church’s members began to question Arthur Rouner’s leadership. He believed the Holy Spirit was calling him to lead Colonial toward an expanded TV ministry and greater commitment to physical as well as spiritual needs in Africa. But these passions were not shared by a substantial and influential part of the Colonial community, and they believed he should focus on other priorities. The potential that this disagreement could split the church was recognized and, ultimately, Rouner resigned during Lent in 1993, but continued as Senior Minister until September 1994. Rouner’s resignation may have averted a break-up of Colonial, but the spirit in the church was wounded by the depth of the controversy. Giving, attendance and membership trended downward, and staffing reductions became necessary.” TAG, *Discovery Report for Visioning Retreats* (TAG Consulting, January 2018), 31. See Appendix C.

⁵⁵ In August 1995 the Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher was unanimously approved to become the third senior minister and began on November 1, 1995. (Bergman, 29.) He sought to bring reconciliation between the church and the Rouners. After nine years of ministry (1995-2004) however, Fisher realized he would not be able to help move the church forward any further and resigned as senior minister. From TAG: “Another important milestone during Fisher’s service was a Service of Reconciliation held in 2000 to restore fellowship between Colonial and Arthur Rouner. Fisher’s time at Colonial brought stability and facilitated some healing. The leadership structure and programs that existed when Rouner resigned continued under Fisher without any significant change. Fisher was greatly appreciated for his eloquent sermons. However, unlike Rouner, he was not highly relational, which dampened his effectiveness. From 1995 to late 2004, when Fisher resigned, membership declined 20% to about 2400, average attendance declined slightly, though giving improved somewhat in the latter years he was at Colonial.” (TAG, 32). Though I disagree with the assessment that the issue was that Fisher was not relational, either way the church was unable to make the necessary move to become different. Fisher recognized this and chose to resign. Following another interim period, the church hired John Westfall. It fast became clear that there were significant issues with his leadership. Again, from TAG: “The new Senior Minister, John Westfall, was installed in late 2005. Although embraced by the congregation initially, and praised for his energy and engaging sermons, his leadership approach and impact began to raise significant concerns. In a painful process that included many attempts to constructively address these concerns with the pastor, the Church Council concluded that he was not a good fit for Colonial and put the matter to a congregational vote. His service ended with his resignation in 2007. Unfortunately, because of the need for confidentiality in sensitive personnel matters, this resulted in another spate of broken relationships and departures, as some members felt that the process was too secretive and too much control was exercised by lay leaders.” (TAG, 32). During this time membership contracted as the church remained in the throes of an inability to break patterns of

These were all histories that I knew: the political history that made possible a church like Colonial and the reality that it was waning in influence with an uncertain future. I came on staff in hope that the history of being a third-space church that was still large and influential enough would make possible my desire to aid in bridging toward another way of being church and white in the face of American Christian Nationalism.

It was with a deep sense of being called and desiring to be a part of the healing of our world and this particular church that I became a minister at the church, seeking to deconstruct the legacy of Colonialism inside the church while also resurrecting the best of its history into a new language for our time.⁵⁶ Part of the exploration in this project then is to move into this context to

congregational unhealth (Membership declined from about 2400 in 2004 to “active membership” of about 1000 in 2010, average attendance declined from 754 in 2004 to 488 in 2010. (TAG, 33)). Daniel Harrell then served as senior minister from August 2009-December 2019. Of his leadership (published in 2018) TAG wrote: “Daniel Harrell became Colonial’s fifth Senior Minister in June 2010, bringing new ideas and new energy to Colonial. Under his leadership many standing committees were eliminated and task forces were introduced to allow for focused ministry involvement and provide more opportunities for congregational engagement. (TAG, 33). Daniel attempted different innovate missional explorations including Innové and a partnership with Upper Room, but by the time I arrived on staff in January 2018, it was clear that Daniel’s leadership had reached the limit of his being able to bring about change and the congregation was on a trajectory of continued decline and eventual death. This was complicated by Daniel’s wife dying of cancer on Easter morning of 2019. In September of that same year, Daniel announced that he was resigning to become the next Editor in Chief of *Christianity Today*. Jeff Lindsay was then unanimously voted in as senior minister in February 2020 after having served as a minister in the church since 1984. Three weeks later the church went to online worship on account of COVID-19. In July 2020, following the murder of George Floyd, church moderator John Seaberg called the church to consider changing its name (at the unanimous recommendation of the Church Council with full ministerial support). The church underwent a 6-month process to build consensus toward a congregational vote to change the name. On January 29, 2021, the vote results were tallied, achieving 61.5% of voting members casting their ballot as a positive for name change...falling short of the necessary 67%. Sadly, many of the names who are listed in the historical documents as those who built the church in the 60s-80s are the same people who were most opposed to any changes that might allow for a new pathway forward. Now celebrating the 75th anniversary of the congregation, we again took up the changing of the name and it passed in December 2021. The new name: Meetinghouse Church, which was made official at our annual meeting in April of 2022. Interestingly, Rouner died the week after the December vote and his memorial was held the week before the annual meeting. Up until his death Rouner opposed current leadership efforts to change the name.

⁵⁶ Of importance, though not noted in any of the formal documentation that I’ve found, is the fact that the building is built on a wetland...we literally colonized a wetland to build the current campus and are set upon pylons driven deep into the ground so as to keep the building afloat. There have been significant issues with this over the years that have caused premature rotting of the building...perhaps an attempt by the land itself to swallow up the vestiges of colonizing impulses that have sought to subjugate the spirit of the waters in the sacred ground itself.

understand its identity while seeking to foster a particular ethical formation in the church, namely that of a community who embodies a new political theology for "a world come of age"⁵⁷ that we might be able to be and become Christians in the face of American Christian Nationalism.

⁵⁷ Here I follow Dietrich Bonhoeffer. As I noted in my application to Colonial Church: "As I read through the statement of faith on the website I on one hand agree and understand the language...AND at the same time I recognize in myself that both by virtue of my being an ethicist and theologian AND my being a millennial means that some of this language is not resonant with how I speak in my day-to-day life. What do I mean by this? Well, take for instance the reference from the Opportunity Profile about loving and glorifying God. What do we mean when we say "glorify God"? I don't think most people know what this means, some have been traumatized by abusive legacies of this wording, and many people just don't care so we might as well be speaking a foreign language. I say this not to be provocative or edgy, but because I actually think these concepts matter. And here's where I'm at with all of this: I love Jesus and I'm so ridiculously Christian that it's central to who I am. I think faith is revolutionary (or can be). I practice and believe in a discerning, critically reflective, historically rooted faith. I think the Bible matters and I take it incredibly seriously (what that means, we can talk about). I think Jesus is center to any Christian self-identification and life. I think salvation and discipleship are necessary. I can tell you that I believe in sanctification, in the Holy Spirit, etc. And when we meet I can tell you how I believe in discipleship more now than I ever have at any point before. AND YET I think we live in a "World Come of Age" (to steal from Dietrich Bonhoeffer who resisted the rise of National Socialism and was killed in Nazi Germany in 1945). See: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, The Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Series, ed. Victoria J. Barnett and Barbara Wojhoski, no. 8. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010): 388 and 457.

PART II

FEMINIST POLITICAL THEOLOGICAL ETHICS: NEW POLITICAL
THEO(PO)ET(H)ICS FOR A WORLD COME OF AGE

CHAPTER TWO
NEW POLITICAL THEOLOGY AND A FEMINIST POLITICAL
THEOLOGICAL ETHICS OF FORMATION

Tell me where, where did Jesus go?
That brown skinned man walkin' the road to Jericho
Tell me where, where did Jesus go?
He's up and been deported to Mexico, allelu

Allelu! What you gonna do?
Allelu! I'm gonna stand by you
Love is all you got, love is all you do
It's bigger than me, and it's bigger than you, allelu

Tell me where, where is Jesus now?
That Middle Eastern man who could feed a hungry crowd
Tell me where, where is Jesus now?
He's on a list of terrorists and they tossed him out of town, allelu

—Sara Thomsen, “Where Did Jesus Go?”¹

Having situated my locatedness and the context for my constructive work, I turn now toward an exploration of the lineage of Political Theology up through the development of the New Political Theology in post-WWII Germany. I next detail why I turn to the tradition of New Political Theology and how it shapes my efforts at developing a feminist political theological ethics of formation for being and becoming Christian in the face of American Christian Nationalism. I then briefly turn to my earliest sermons that I preached at the church as an example of how my theo-ethical framework shapes my preaching. Finally, I outline Haker's

¹ Sara Thomsen, “Where Did Jesus Go?,” track 4 on *Song Like a Seed*, 2019, Spotify streaming audio, 320 kbps.

Framework for Ethical Reasoning as a way to point toward the direction of my ethical analysis and constructive work in subsequent chapters.² In chapters three and four, I discuss two voices of New Political Theology, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Dorothee Sölle, and outline why each of their work is vital to my own understanding and embodiment of my feminist political theological ethics of formation.

Political Theology: Definitions, Origins, and the “Old” and New Traditions

In this first section I revisit the origins of western political theology, highlighting the political philosophy of Carl Schmitt (herein named as “Old” political theology), and the New Political Theology tradition as so named by Johann Baptist Metz.³ I do so in order to situate my work and to begin to flesh out the particular characteristics and aims of my project. Though I employ the term “political theology” throughout my work, it is important to name this is a shorthand way of referencing what is a particularly *western* thought tradition which, though originating in Greek philosophy, is also a Christian tradition.⁴ Though it is beyond the scope of this project to deeply explore traditions originating in the east, Africa, and indigenous communities of the global south and west, I want to name that they exist as a way of both

² See: Hille Haker, “Ethical Reflexions in Nanomedicine,” in *Nanobiotechnology, Nanomedicine, and Human Enhancement*, eds. Johann S. Ach and Beate Lüttenberg (Berlin, Germany: Lit Verlag, 2008), 71. In the later chapters I will only employ sections from my sermons as ways of illustrating how I am developing and dispatching my ethical vision in and through preaching. The full sermon texts are available in Appendix F or on my personal website: www.sarawg.com.

³ This is the aim of Metz in his book *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*. Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. and ed. by J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2013).

⁴ This is not to say that there are not now diverse global and cultural political theologies, rather that they are each responding to the western, Christian tradition in conversation with their particular identities. See, for instance, chapters 18-21, 25, 41-43 in William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Scott, eds. *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2019); or chapters 3, 16-20, 23, 25, 34, and 36 in Rubén Rosario Rodríguez, ed. *T&T Clark Handbook of Political Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2020).

decentering my own tradition from any hubris that it is the sole human lineage and also as a way of taking up responsibility for the particular schools of thought that have been handed down to and have shaped me.⁵

Political Theology: Definitions

Political Theology has been defined alternatively as: “a political theory, political doctrine, or a political position for which, according to the self-understanding of the political theologian, divine revelation is the supreme authority and the ultimate ground;”⁶ or that which asks “about the political consciousness of theology itself,” not by making “political questions the central theme of theology or to give political systems and movements religious support. Rather, political theology designates the field, the milieu, the environment, and the medium in which Christian theology should be articulated today.”⁷ It has also been understood as a discourse and

⁵ These traditions have not necessarily employed the language of “political theology,” but rather have developed their own frameworks (and names) for making sense of the political and the sacred. See, for instance: Bustami Mohamed Khir, “The Islamic Quest for Socio-Political Justice,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, eds. William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Scott, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2019), 589-603; Gabriel Ingeborg et al., *Political Theologies in Orthodox Christianity: Common Challenges - Divergent Positions* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017); Marilú Rojas Salazar, “Decolonizing Theology: Panentheist Spiritualities and Proposals from the Ecofeminist Epistemologies of the South,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 34, no. 2 (2018): 92–98; see “Society, Politics, and Nation,” in Gavin D. Flood, *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 493-587; see “Civility, The Sacred, and Human Rights” in Christopher S. Grenda et al. *Profane: Sacrilegious Expression in a Multicultural Age* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014), 205-374; Miguel E. Vatter, *Living Law: Jewish Political Theology from Hermann Cohen to Hannah Arendt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); SherAli Tareen, “Competing Political Theologies: Intra-Muslim Polemics on the Limits of Prophetic Intercession,” *Political Theology: The Journal of Christian Socialism* 12, no. 3 (2011): 418–443. The diversity of cultural traditions at the intersection of the sacred and the political has never been more clear to me than during the time I spent in Cambodia. The ancient Angkor Civilization’s temples (such as Angkor Wat) located in modern Cambodia reflect the wedding of Pali and Sanskrit rituals and fusion of Hindu and Buddhist belief systems that are codified on the temple walls. Long predating the Greco-Roman philosopher Plato, the empire flourished between 800-1300 AD, built on its own comprehensive political theological system. For more on this tradition see: Charles Higham, *The Civilization of Angkor* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

⁶ Heinrich Meier, “What is Political Theology?” trans. by Marcus Brainard, *Interpretation* 30, no. 1 (2002): 86.

⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, “Political Theology,” *Theology Today* 28, no. 1 (1971): 6.

“self-reflection of modern political and moral theory and theology itself regarding its normative sources.”⁸ As opposed to other streams of theology it is a “conscious reflection on what constitutes the most appropriate relationship between the state and the communities of faith living under the authority of the state.”⁹ As an “umbrella term” it encompasses “a wide variety of analyses of the relationships among religion, society, and politics,” which is “more of a heuristic framework than a positive doctrine or political program and points to the importance of disarticulating the geographic, temporal, and cultural stratifications of both political and religious practices.”¹⁰ Or, finally:

The term “political theology” stands for a struggle of legitimization of power and, at the same time, the justification of normative moral claims in modernity or postmodernity. The discourse on political theology can be regarded as the self-reflection of modern political / moral theory and theology itself regarding its normative sources... (reemerging) as a lens to interpret and understand the current global order, structures of governance, the moral question of normativity and theology’s or religion’s role in the public sphere.”¹¹

Fundamentally, for the purposes of this work, political theology is understood as the discourse and tradition that explores the relationship between the political and theological as it relates to normative sources, moral norms, and interpretative framework for making sense of the call to be and become Christian in the political/public world. As I will detail later, this work is that of a political theological ethics in that it is interested not just in the theoretical relationship between the political and theological but also in moral formation and norms that shape the way

⁸ Hille Haker, “Political Theologies in a Post-Christian World,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Political Theology*, ed. Rubén Rosario Rodríguez (New York: T&T Clark, 2020): 547.

⁹ Rodríguez, *T&T Clark Handbook of Political Theology*, 8.

¹⁰ Annika Thiem, “Schmittian Shadows and Contemporary Theological-Political Constellations,” *Social Research* 80, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 18 and 27.

¹¹ Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*, 269.

one lives as a Christian in the public sphere.¹²

Political Theology: Origins

Though political theology since Constantine has been dominantly shaped by Christian theology, the origins of the discourse can be traced back to Stoic philosophy and the writing of Panaetius who distinguished between three classes of divinity (personified powers of nature, the gods of the state religion, and those of myth).¹³ Myth is often understood to be the stories of a people which are carried by poets and artists and writers, the natural world is explored by philosophy, and political theology is proper to the organization of a society around its religious reverence.¹⁴ This three-fold distinction was adopted by the Roman Empire and Varro, the Roman Stoic, considered political theology to be the highest society. Roman cities were deified (*Dea Roma*) and the earliest Christians were thought to be atheists because they refused Rome's ordering of the world, worshipping YHWH alone (and were thus considered a threat to the state).¹⁵ However, when Constantine embraced Christianity as the religion of the empire, Christian political theology moved from being a prophetic critique of the state to being

¹² Some resources for reading further about Political Theology: Michael Welker et al., eds., *Political Theology: Contemporary Challenges and Future Directions* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013); Rodríguez, *T & T Clark Handbook*; Cavanaugh, *The Wiley Blackwell Companion*. Jeffrey Robbins, *Radical Democracy and Political Theology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Additionally, much work has been done to explore what political theology means in our world of increasing plurality. See for instance Benhabib's "The Return of Political Theology." Seyla Benhabib, "The Return of Political Theology: The Scarf Affair in Comparative Constitutional Perspective in France, Germany, and Turkey," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 36, no. 3-4 (2010): 451-471.

¹³ For further exploration of this history see: Moltmann, "Political Theology," 10; and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, "Political Theology and the Critique of Modernity: Facing the Challenges of the Present," *Distinktion* 10 (2005): 87.

¹⁴ See Moltmann's *Political Theology* for a wonderful introduction. Jürgen Moltmann, "Political Theology."

¹⁵ Moltmann notes that early Christians were considered godless and seen as a threat to the state. He writes: "As is well known, however, early Christianity and those who followed the crucified were considered by pagan philosophers (Celsus), as well as the Roman Senate, to be godless. For this reason, it was viewed as an enemy of the state and was persecuted." (Moltmann, "Political Theology," 11).

(dominantly) the religion of the state.¹⁶ Since that time, as Christianity spread, it supplanted other religions as it encountered them. This has long been a double-edged sword for Christian mission.

As Moltmann notes of the embrace of Christianity by empire:

Of course, it has "Christianized" the existing state religions, but at the same time it has been "politicized" in the sense of the current *raison of state*. Therefore we cannot really speak of the Christian churches in the European societies being non-political. Precisely because today they often consider themselves non-political and want always to remain socially in the neutral middle, they fulfill needs in the fashion of a political religion; that is, they provide for the symbolic integration of society and its homogenization and self-confirmation.¹⁷

Yet the critique of the marriage of the political and the religious as state religion remains a through line in Christian theology and reformations within the church throughout history.

Drawing on the historic political theology of the people of Israel in the Hebrew Bible to Augustine's confrontation of Roman political theology in *The City of God* to Luther's articulation of the two kingdoms, the Church has long wrestled with what a truly Christian political theology ought to look like and mean for Christianity and the church.¹⁸

With the advent of the Enlightenment and its rendering of medieval metaphysical justifications of the divine or human ordering as no longer valid, religion became privatized, as

¹⁶ Although there have also always been critiques and concerns about this wedding of state power with Christian religion. See, for instance: Charles Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2010).

¹⁷ Moltmann, 10.

¹⁸ Though the philosophical discourse begins with the Stoics in the west, this wrestling with political theology is pervasive throughout the Hebrew Scriptures and many current political theologians turn to the texts of the Jewish and Christian scriptures for fodder in developing prophetic political theologies. As Haker notes: "These theologies are all "political" in the sense I am using the term in this book. They stem from a biblical tradition that is prophetic, revolutionary, and spiritual." (Haker, *Towards a Critical*, 11) For an overview of Augustine see: Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Augustine" in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, eds. William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Scott, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2019), 41-53. For more on Luther's political theology and notion of the Two Kingdoms, see: Per Frostin, *Luther's Two Kingdoms Doctrine: A Critical Study* (Lund, Sweden: Lund University Press, 1994); and Andrew Bradstock, "The Reformation," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, eds. William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Scott, 67-79, 2nd ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2019).

reflected in the works of Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and the like.¹⁹ In response to this move there was, as Schüssler-Fiorenza notes, a counter-revolution period where political theology functioned as a critique of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. This was followed by two additional periods throughout which the conception of “political theology” evolved: the post-Weimar German Republic where political theology critiqued liberal democracy; and the post-World War II German theology where political theology critiqued the modern privatization of religion.²⁰ It is to the second of these periods, which I name as “Old” Political Theology, that I now turn.

“Old” Political Theology

If, as Meier argues, “the cause of political theology is discovered in: authority, revelation, and obedience,”²¹ then it is no surprise to see these matters visited in the political philosophy of German legal philosopher, Carl Schmitt, even as he translates them to his own political ends. As detailed by Schüssler-Fiorenza, Schmitt’s work was a response to the Weimar Republic’s reach for liberal democracy, arguing instead for an anti-enlightenment political philosophy grounded in the authority of the supreme leader.²² In his book *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, Schmitt argues for a political theology which is really a philosophy of

¹⁹ Ola Sigurdson, writes: “If you study the philosophical concept of religion in John Locke’s *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), in Immanuel Kant’s *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone* (1793) or in Friedrich Schleiermacher’s *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (1799), three important books from the early modern period, they all are concerned with the essence of religion as something subjective and private in contrast to objectivity and sociality.” Ola Sigurdson, “Beyond Secularism? Towards a Post-Secular Political Theology,” *Modern Theology* 26, no. 2 (2010): 186.

²⁰ See Schüssler-Fiorenza, “Political Theology and the Critique of Modernity,” 87.

²¹ Meier, “What is Political Theology?” 79.

²² Schüssler-Fiorenza, “Political Theology and the Critique of Modernity,” 87.

law that employs the force and metaphors of theology out of the belief that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.”²³ So while Schmitt was not a theologian, but rather a political jurist and philosopher, he turns to political theology because he believes that theology is like the dwarf in Walter Benjamin’s chess machine, hiding under the table while secretly directing the moves of the visible puppet.²⁴ Said alternatively, Schmitt’s political theology was not a theological but a political and legal account of the nature of sovereignty in the political sphere.

Thus, in terms of authority, Schmitt focuses on the transference of sovereignty from the divine to the state as a result of secularization.²⁵ Here the God-concept is now discovered in the leader, for as God rules the world so too the sovereign rules the nation. The sovereign “is he who decides the state of exception.”²⁶ The sovereign is able to act outside of the law and wherever the legal system fails to answer the question of competence.²⁷ For just as God is not bound by human law, neither is the sovereign. Schmitt’s connection of the political sovereign with theological sovereign re-fashions the political leader as God on earth and, as such, laid the philosophical

²³ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. by George Schwab (1985; repr., Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006): 36.

²⁴ Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in *Selected Writings IV, 1938-1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 389-400. Haker writes about this in *Critical Theologies*, 274.

²⁵ For a helpful summary of Schmitt’s work see: Derek Simon, “The New Political Theology of Metz: Confronting Schmitt’s Decisionist Political Theology of Exclusion,” *Horizons* 30, no. 2 (2003): 227-254.

²⁶ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 5. Schmitt equates this to a miracle in Christianity and it reveals the true nature of sovereignty. *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁷ See *Ibid.*, 10-11. Here he follows Hobbes’s *Leviathan*: the sovereign power and not truth make the laws. See Schmitt, xviii-xix (quoting Hobbes, chapter 26).

justification for the emergence and operation of the Führer inside of National Socialism.²⁸ For, as Vincent Lloyd notes, in Schmitt: “The German leader should be re-imagined in the image of God, and this was what the National Socialists promised to do.”²⁹

Schmitt’s conception of revelation is discovered through the sovereign and the “politics of exclusion.” As Simon notes, Schmitt’s political theology:

Uses theological traditions and religious convictions to function tacitly in shaping and legitimating the political imagination behind absolutist decisionism ("The Sovereign is the one who decides in a situation of exceptional crisis") and an identity politics of violent exclusion ("The distinction between friend and enemy" guarantees that "the sphere of the political is ultimately determined by the real possibility of an enemy").³⁰

The role of the sovereign in both determining the identity of the enemy and erasing it makes possible the “we” of the state. That the enemy of the state is particularly racialized and wrought through racist ideology is clear with consideration of Schmitt’s naming himself as *Benito Cereno* on his 50th birthday. In the forward to the 1985 edition of Schmitt’s *Political Theology*, Tracy B. Strong writes that Schmitt referenced Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* as early as 1938. Benito was the captain of a slave ship and the slaves revolted, leaving only him alive. Eventually the slaves and ship were recaptured. Strong connects Benito to Schmitt’s sovereign, but it is William Scheuerman’s interpretation of Schmitt’s turn to Benito that I find particularly interesting: as he argues, Schmitt turns to Benito as a way of naming his disdain at the “multi-racial, Jew-dominated American occupying power” in postwar Germany. In this reading then—which

²⁸ As Schüssler-Fiorenza notes: “His critique provided the historical, juridical, and theoretical background for Hitler’s justification of the suspension of basic rights and for pre-emptive war.” (Schüssler-Fiorenza, “Political Theology,” 103)

²⁹ Vincent Lloyd, “Christian Responses to the Holocaust: Political Theology in Europe,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Political Theology*, ed. Rubén Rosario Rodríguez (New York: T&T Clark, 2020), 37.

³⁰ Simon, “The New Political Theology of Metz,” 236.

follows my own—the sovereign is the one who makes possible the state of the friend who is “us.”³¹

New Political Theology

The reality of the horror that is possible under a political regime in which the sovereign acts beyond the rule of law, brutally enforcing and defining who is friend and enemy was no more clear than it was in the aftermath of the Shoah. In awakening to this horror and trying to both make sense of the Holocaust and Christianity’s complicity in it, some Christian theologians reappraised political theology not in order to discover a universalizing political theory, but as a way of wrestling with the central question of what it means to be Christian.³² Although the term “New Political Theology” is coined by Metz, I use it here to name all those who, like Metz, are responding to the Shoah and what it exposes about the violent anti-Jewish and bourgeois privatized faith of western Christianity.³³

In naming his theology “New Political Theology,” Metz acknowledges that all theology is now done “after Auschwitz”³⁴ and, as such, must be distinguished over and against Schmitt's

³¹ See: Schmitt, *Political Theology*, viii-xi. For more on William Scheuerman’s interpretation of Schmitt’s employing Benito see footnote seven on page x.

³² I employ the term “Shoah” here instead of Holocaust for two reasons: 1) this is the term employed by New Political Theologians (and is the most common reference utilized in Europe to name the horror); and 2) It is a Hebrew term and centers the genocide of Jewish people.

³³ In a 1966 lecture in Chicago, Metz critiques theology that has come before as too individualistic and isolated, arguing that a theology of the world “is not mere theology of the cosmos normally or transcendental theology of the person, but a theology of the emerging political and social order, this theology of the world must be a political theology.” Johann Baptist Metz, *Theology of the World* (New York: Scribner, 1968), 95-96.

³⁴ Haker employs this understanding in her work, and I follow her and Metz here. See: Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*, 281-2. They both take this term from the work of Jewish theologian Richard Rubenstein. See: Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism*. 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). I am grateful to Max Brumberg-Kraus for pointing this out to me.

conservative, pro-Nazi political theology of the state as well as the implicit Christian political theology that made possible Hitler's rise to power.³⁵ Instead, New Political Theology is a turn to interrogating the relationship between the church and the political in view of oppression and suffering. It holds that the church is to be a people shaped by the cross and, as such, the church is called to live in a critical relationship with the state, standing up for the rights of everyone, wrestling with the reality of suffering in the world and the polis. This then is one of the central tenets of the *New Political Theology*: the demand that theology must find a language to speak in light of the horrors of the Shoah, a language found only in view of critique in solidarity with the crucified.³⁶ As Moltmann articulated: "The memory of what happened at that time has made us increasingly aware that we also have no right to speak of God and with God if we do not do it in the midst of the conflicts of our political world."³⁷

There are various ways to name the constitutive elements of the New Political Theology.³⁸ The elements I want to highlight here are that: (1) theology must speak to the

³⁵ Simon and others note that Metz is actually countering Schmitt's central conception of political theology. See: Simon, "The *New Political Theology*": 227-254. Simon writes: "This article seeks to establish that the innovative and ongoing development of Metz's New Political Theology is specifically constructed as an effort to delegitimize, deconstruct, and deliver an alternative to the political theology of Carl Schmitt." (Simon, "The New Political Theology of Metz," 230). See also: Richard Shorten, "Political Theology, Political Religion, and Secularization," *Political Studies Review* 8 (2010): 180-191.

³⁶ Kirwan summarizes this well in Michael Kirwan, *Political Theology: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 6.

³⁷ Moltmann, "Political Theology," 7. For more of an explication of the critical role of theology since the Shoah see: Hille Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*.

³⁸ Schüssler-Fiorenza outlines the elements of the New Political Theology as being: (1) an interpretive lens of society in view of secularization and the market economy which; (2) critiqued and responded to the prior generation; (3) embracing Christian eschatology's political impact as eschatological hope interrupts regimes of suffering and calls forth the possibility of a new world; and (4) It is not about any specific policy or party but about the "eschatological proviso and apocalyptic interruption." (Schüssler-Fiorenza, "Political Theology," 91-2) Haker writes that as a theological concept, New Political Theology is about the essence of theology and is also a political concept as it critiques privatized faith, making it a public political theology which takes up responsibility for structural

political world and political systems, refusing a privatized faith; (2) theology must take up responsibility for history in view of the suffering; (3) to take up responsibility demands a critical relationship with theology and politics anywhere it enables or emboldens oppression and injustice; 4) God is discovered not through authoritarian edicts or Divine Law, but through the cross where God's vulnerability and solidarity is with those who suffer under unjust systems (for there is no enemy—everyone is friend in view of the eschatological provision and coming kingdom).³⁹

New Political Theology critiqued privatized faith that made possible the Shoah. Thus, for Metz, if we dare speak of God we *must* therefore do so in the face of the conflicts in our political world. As he wrote:

During the Third Reich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer pointedly reminded the church that "only those who cry out for the Jews may sing Gregorian chants," and he gladly sang Gregorian chants. The memory of what happened at that time has made us increasingly aware that we also have no right to speak of God and with God if we do not do it in the midst of the conflicts of our political world.⁴⁰

This is a turn to taking up political responsibility within history in view of the one who suffers.

As Moltmann notes: "Responsible theology itself stands consciously between the Christian,

injustice. As such it critiques Schmitt's "political-theological decisionism that rests on the sovereignty of the political leader, and a hermeneutic theology that pretended to be a-political in its interest to discern divine truth." Rather, it now locates the authority of God in those who suffer turning from orthodoxy to the orthopraxis in pursuit of liberation and the struggle for justice. Finally, it offers a method through turning critical theory. As Haker notes: "In contrast to the sovereignty concept, however, critical theory provides an epistemology that calls for an ongoing self-critique and social critique of the normative orders." (Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*, 279).

³⁹ It is important to name that New Political Theology is contrasted with other critiques inside of Neo-Orthodoxy like that of Barth. While there is a resonance between the two streams, Barth and others with him responded by naming God as wholly other, directing Christian churches to refuse support for nationalist ideology as is made clear in the Barmen Declaration of 1934. In this way, Barth and other neo-orthodox theologians made clear what Christians ought not to do politically, but they struggled to articulate a positive account of what Christians ought to do. For if God is wholly other, what criteria can be used to authorize particular stances on justice issues?

⁴⁰ Metz, "Political Theology," 7.

eschatological message of freedom and the socio-political reality.”⁴¹ Theology must speak of and give life to all persons by refusing their death and speaking of their suffering which is a “*dangerous memory*” that undoes unjust powers of the world.⁴² This memory recounts both the cross of Christ and the remembrance of those who suffer. This then is where authority and non-metaphysical grounding for action is discovered—not in the divine law-giver but in the Christ who was crucified.⁴³ With Metz, Moltmann speaks of the cross as a dangerous memory that gives voice to that which is a risk to remember in the world, namely the “dangerous memory of the messianic message of Christ within the conditions of contemporary society.”⁴⁴ This memory is dangerous because it grounds theology in a *critical relationship* with the political systems of the world that prevent persons from becoming subjects.

Critique then reclaims what political systems sought to repress through power, and through memories it upends the unjust systems of the world. Critique calls theology to an “interrogation of institutions, words, and symbols” where it “must ascertain whether a religious opium is being mediated to the people or a real ferment of freedom [...] whether the crucified one is made present or the idols of the nation are served.”⁴⁵

⁴¹ Moltmann, “Political Theology,” 8.

⁴² Moltmann names that Christians are to be liberators: “A Christian “political theology” wants to bring the Christians as Christians, that is, as liberators, to the place where they are being waited upon by the crucified one. In the suffering and condemned ones of this earth Christ is waiting upon his own and their presence” (Moltmann, 23)

⁴³ Haker notes: “As *theology*, its recourse to God is not the emperor-king or sovereign as a secret power above and beyond history—quite to the contrary, its recourse (and authority) is the *crucified God* (Moltmann), encountered *in* history and *in* the world, in any suffering individual or group. Theology’s deck in the public political and moral discourse therefore entails no trump card. All it has is its faith as *conviction and commitment* that to claim to respect human freedom and dignity, to care for all creatures, and to insist on justice as the foundation of the global social contract *is* the human way to encounter God in the world” (Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*, 10)

⁴⁴ Moltmann, “Political Theology,” 8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

Part of this critique then becomes the critique of the idolatry within the church and the way that the church refuses to enter the way of the cross. It offers a political orientation committed to all persons' becoming subjects.⁴⁶ This critique becomes an explicitly political *theology* and is developed out of a specific Christology—a theology of the cross where the “weakness of God” becomes solidarity through suffering with the world, and the resurrection hope becomes that which is not just a utopia but a reality where the presence in Christ takes on the memory of the suffering of all people in history.

My work examines the *New Political Theology* that was developed in the wake of the Shoah, particularly in Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Dorothee Sölle as they are instructive in my own understanding of what it means to do the work of political theological ethics as a preacher and pastor.⁴⁷ I turn to Bonhoeffer and Sölle because their work is particularly important in offering an insight for American theology which, inside of the white Protestant academy, has largely refused to take seriously the sign of our own time that demands an account: our national legacies of racism and genocide.

Why New Political Theology?

Rupture and Responsibility

There are many reasons that I turn to this tradition. The first of these is that I want to take

⁴⁶ Ola Sigurdson fleshes out this idea in the article “Beyond Secularism?” and picks up Žižek (amongst others) to talk about how the potential for emancipation cannot be realized by destroying religion but in discovering the potential for its emancipation. He points out that churches will always be political in a sense, but it is about the aspect of critique even of itself. Sigurdson, “Beyond Secularism?” 191.

⁴⁷ Though Bonhoeffer died before the end of the war, I believe that his work, particularly in *LPP* anticipates the movement of the post-war New Political Theologies (though one can argue that this his work had already taken this turn ever since he was in Harlem...as has been done by Reggie Williams in *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

seriously the necessary rupture that has too little troubled white Christianity in the United States: our twin legacies of genocide of native persons and genocide and enslavement of black persons. Not only has US Christianity largely refused responsibility for these twin legacies (and the more modern realities of colonization and continued impacts of our geo-political policies and actions), but we have valorized our actions under a banner of our being God's chosen people, a city on a hill, and those following our "Manifest destiny."⁴⁸ It is no longer tenable for us to continue this legacy. As Haker notes in her *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*:

The acknowledgment that (mostly white) Christians not only participated but also contributed ideologically to the slaughtering, enslavement, and degradation of other peoples, other ethnicities, or other religions must therefore not merely be a historical footnote. Quite to the contrary, it must be the starting point of any Christian theology.⁴⁹

Thus, in turning to New Political Theology, I find a resource for taking up responsibility for the ruptures that we have too long refused.

The second reason I engage with New Political Theology flows from the first: not only

⁴⁸ As Tzvetan Todorov has noted: "It will be recalled that in 1500 the world population is approximately 400 million, of whom 80 million live in the Americas. By the middle of the sixteenth century, out of these 80 million, there remain ten." Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 133. For more on the legacies of the doctrine of discovery, manifest destiny, and the belief that we are a chosen people see, for instance: Conrad Cherry, *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press: 1998); Reginald Horsman, "Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism," In *Critical White Studies* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 139–144; Damon T. Berry, *Blood and Faith: Christianity in American White Nationalism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2017); Eric P. Kaufmann, *The Rise and Fall of Anglo-America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Lauren Langman and George N. Lundskow, *God, Guns, Gold and Glory American Character and Its Discontents* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*; Steven T. Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2008); Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah, *Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery* (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press, 2019); and Wendy Warren, *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2016). For a discussion of Native American enslavement, see: Andrés Reséndez, *The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016). Historian Tim Snyder hauntingly recalls the influence of these ideologies on Hitler's own mythologizing of the Aryan people. See: Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (New York: Crown, Tim Duggan Books, 2015).

⁴⁹ Haker, *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*, 264.

do I believe that US Christian theology must take up the rupture that demands an accounting from our similarly privatized faith, but also in this tradition, I find mentors and conversation partners for what it means to take up the history of one's people and one's identities in order to respond responsibly. While there are many liberation theologians and ethicists of color who deeply form my work, they are largely working against or in critique of the dominant theological paradigms which have been white, western, Christian, heterosexual, and male. In my work and at this time, I am especially concerned to offer a political theology that repudiates the "old" and pervasive political theology in our country: that of white Christian Nationalism. As a white American woman I find challenge and invitation for this work by turning to white German Christians who were wrestling in their own context with similar questions about their faith tradition.

Christian Nationalism: Some Reflections

As I note in the first chapter, I took the call to my church in the midst of a moment of resurgent Christian Nationalism and white supremacy in the United States in order to see if I could work to help foster space for white Christians in the suburbs to become *more Christian* in the ways of Jesus and to foster space where we might repudiate the machinations of Christian Nationalism. Thus, I turn to New Political Theology as I reach for models and language and imaginations to help invite white Christians to be and become Christian in the face of American (white) Christian Nationalism.

Let me pause here for a minute to name a bit more about the language of Christian Nationalism. Christian Nationalism is the ideological belief held by many about America's Christian heritage, calling, and destiny. As I have already noted, since the founding of America

by European settlers, our colonial history has essentially been one that has wedded being Christian with being American.⁵⁰ There have been tensions between this Christian Nationalistic stream and other, more prophetic Christian faiths, and this conflict has been re-exposed in profound ways in the reactions to the presidency of Obama and the rise in resurgent white supremacy in US politics that led to the election of Donald Trump and the political warring we see up until today.⁵¹ As Andrew Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry note in their 2020 book *Taking America Back for God*, Christian Nationalism is more than the role that Christian ideals and symbols have played in public life in the United States: rather, Christian Nationalism is about forming and preserving a kind of social order based off of hierarchies of race, religion, gender, and other social demarcations of identity.⁵²

⁵⁰ See, for instance: Philip Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017). He writes that Christian Nationalism “more explicitly seeks to align America’s national identity, iconography, and policies with an evangelical Christian God,” seeking fusion between national and Christian identities. Additionally, Gorski argues that Christian Nationalism identifies with the apocalyptic and warlike messages addressed to God’s people in the Bible and conflates these with our national struggles.

⁵¹ See, for instance: Jack Jenkins, “How Trump’s Presidency Reveals the True Nature of Christian Nationalism: Scholars Say Christian Nationalism Isn’t Dead Yet. It Could Be More Powerful Than Ever,” *Think Progress*, September 13, 2017, <https://archive.thinkprogress.org/christian-nationalism-religion-research-b8f9cdc16239/>; Jack Jenkins, “Why Christian Nationalists Love Trump,” *Think Progress*, August 7, 2017, <https://archive.thinkprogress.org/trumps-christian-nationalism-c6fe206e40cc/>.

⁵² Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*. For more on Christian Nationalism, see: Samuel L. Perry et al., “Prejudice and Pandemic in the Promised Land: How White Christian Nationalism Shapes Americans’ Racist and Xenophobic Views of COVID-19,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 44, no. 5 (2021): 759–772; Samuel L. Perry et al., “Culture Wars and COVID-19 Conduct: Christian Nationalism, Religiosity, and Americans’ Behavior During the Coronavirus Pandemic,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 59, no. 3 (2020): 405–416; Ruth Braunstein, “Muslims as Outsiders, Enemies, and Others: The 2016 Presidential Election and the Politics of Religious Exclusion,” *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 5, no. 3 (2017): 355–72; Mark T. Edwards, *Christian Nationalism in the United States* (MDPI - Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute: 2017); Matthew McCullough, *The Cross of War: Christian Nationalism and U.S. Expansion in the Spanish-American War* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014); Jonathon O’Donnell, S., “The Deliverance of the Administrative State: Deep State Conspiracism, Charismatic Demonology, and the Post-Truth Politics of American Christian Nationalism,” *Religion* 50, no. 4 (2020): 696–719; Daniel Tope et al., “Religion, Race, and Othering Barack Obama,” *Social Currents* 4, no. 1 (2017): 51–70; Joanna Piacenza and Robert P. Jones, “More Christians See America’s Days a ‘Christian Nation’ behind Us,” *Public Religion Research Institute*, January 18, 2017,

Research shows that Christian Nationalists tend to draw rigid boundaries around ethnic and cultural group membership, justifying harsher penalties, biases, and/or excessive uses of force against racial minorities.⁵³ In their article, “God’s Country in Black and Blue: How Christian Nationalism Shapes Americans’ Views About Police (Mis)treatment of Blacks,” Perry, Whitehead, and Davis note that those who identify with Christian Nationalism are actually less religious (where being religious is measured by self-reporting of worship attendance and time spent in prayer and reading the Bible)—meaning they are more shaped by the mythology of American Christian Nationalism than Christian faith. As they write:

Even more significantly, Americans who were more religious (measured in terms of worship attendance, prayer, and sacred text reading) were actually less likely to affirm our race and policing measures once we controlled for Christian nationalism.⁵⁴

Those who identify as white evangelicals remain Trump’s biggest supporters and continually show up as being those least inclined to believe systemic injustices exist. For instance, using data collected just after the Baltimore riots in April 2015, Robert Jones of *Public Religion and Research Institute*, notes in his book *The End of White Christian America*, that although 74 percent of black Americans believed the recent police killings of black men were part of a larger trend, only 29 percent of white evangelicals agreed and instead 57 percent of

<https://www.prii.org/spotlight/america-christian-nation-trump-inauguration/>; John Sides, “Race, Religion, and Immigration in 2016: How the Debate over American Identity Shaped the Election and What It Means for a Trump Presidency,” *A Research Report from the Democracy Fund Voter Study Group*, June 2017, <https://www.voterstudygroup.org/publication/race-religion-immigration-2016>; Joshua Davis, “Enforcing Christian Nationalism: Examining the Link between Group Identity and Punitive Attitudes in the United States.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 57, no. 2 (June 2018): 300-317.

⁵³ See, for instance: Samuel L. Perry, et al., “God’s Country in Black and Blue: How Christian Nationalism Shapes Americans’ Views About Police (Mis)treatment of Blacks,” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 5, no. 1 (2019): 130–146.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 141. This means that those who are more religious are *more likely* to believe that there is disproportionate mistreatment of blacks.

white evangelicals felt that the killings were isolated events. Jones concludes that white evangelicals' unwillingness to acknowledge police discrimination may stem from concerns about white Christians' waning cultural and political influence in the United States, leading to a loss of empathy and increasing conflict between them and people of color.⁵⁵

From Political Theology to Political Ethics

Not only do I turn to New Political Theology because I am concerned about taking seriously the rupture and taking up responsibility in view of white American Christian Nationalism, but also because New Political Theology is fundamentally liberationist. This is to say that the New Political Theology is concerned with suffering not as a category (questions of theodicy) but as an obstacle to the realization of the vision of the kingdom of God which is for the honoring of the *Imago Dei* of all persons and their flourishing. In other words, the vision of the cross is for the end to suffering and the possibility of freedom for all persons, the cause of solidarity, compassion, and justice.⁵⁶ This connection between theology and ethics has long been clear inside of other liberative ethics such as black and liberation theologies which admit at their core the connection between ethics and theology, though this connection and assumption of the wedding of the two has been less clear in some of the work of Metz and Moltmann.⁵⁷ While there is much that could be said of the connection between particular liberation traditions inside

⁵⁵ Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016): 153–55.

⁵⁶ I employ the terms “liberationist” and “liberative” in following the work of Miguel de la Torre in his *Ethics, a Liberative Approach*. Miguel de la Torre, *Ethics: A Liberative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

⁵⁷ The false divide between theology and ethics was made clear no less than in the death of James Cone who was not recognized by the Society of Christian Ethics as an ethicist, though his work as a black liberation theologian is clearly theo-ethical in nature. Thus, it was as a part of the student caucus leadership of the SCE that we decided to host our session to honor the legacy of Rev. Dr. Cone and his contribution to the field of Christian ethics. This same impulse is picked up inside of feminist theological ethics and Haker's *Critical Political Theology*.

of political theology, here I wish to make clear that the relation between theology and ethics is one that for me must be held in a unity that reflects the actuality of how we live our embodied lives, a realization and commitment which has long been central in liberationist ethics.

Finally, I also turn to this tradition because of the theological resources it offers for re-conceiving responsibility, political theology and faith, faith as critique, understandings of God, the turn to the oppressed and ones who suffer, and resources for critiquing unjust systems. It is this conviction—that at the core of New Political Theology is a fundamental critique of the dualism that has long existed between theology as the enterprise of naming the transcendent versus ethics as reflection on lived morality—that my work seeks to hold intentionally together, rejecting dualism as a possibility in any theological endeavor,⁵⁸ for, fundamentally, ethics is about the way we live our lives in the real world. For ethics, the reflection upon the real, historical remembrance of the violence that occur to us in our bodies as we adjudicate the right and employ ethical judgment is crucial, living in view of one another to take up the political responsibility for our own lives and the lives of our neighbors. And theology is the grounding of

⁵⁸ Fiorenza notes in his “Political Theology” that there has been debate between the political and liberation theologians on the role of ethics. He argues that political theologians have taken ambiguous positions in regard to the function of ethics. For instance, Gutierrez criticized Metz for seeming to make an independent political ethics the mediating link between the Gospel and political decisions. Here is it most appropriate to understand Metz’s work as evolving through three phases. Though in his first he focused on eschatology, in his second phase he affirmed the importance of the linkage in response to the criticisms of his early and exclusive emphasis on eschatology (Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, translated by J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Paulist Press, 1997)) and was much more cautious in regard to ethics. Instead of arguing, as he had earlier, that political theology is an ethics of change, he underscores that political theology is much more an eschatological attitude of interruption than one of ethics. He radicalizes the notion of an “ethics of change” through the category of “interruption.” What remains un-thematized in all these attempts is the notion of rights, human rights and the moral appeal to rights language in a global and cosmopolitan sense. How does the appeal to human rights square with political theology? Are rights to be criticized, buttressed, or transformed? Where I follow Metz though is in his shift (third phase) to compassion and in his concern that theology be reduced to ethical reflection because ethics cannot answer the question of theodicy. This, it seems, is why Haker turns to a Critical Political Ethics, which I will name in my work as a feminist political theological ethics.

the hope, of the critique, and of the possibility to live and imagine differently.

Thus, in turning to New Political Theology, I follow Hille Haker who notes that fundamentally, political theology must be understood as a political ethics and is, as such, prophetic theology. She writes:

Political theology must be conceived as a political ethics, however relating its theory of justice to a theology of history: this theology does not need a philosophy of history that claims the ‘end of history;’ rather, it will insist on the possibility of transformation at every moment and the necessity of such political, social, and personal metanoia or conversion. Political theology must be prophetic theology.⁵⁹

A Feminist Political Theological Ethics of Formation

As a political and prophetic theology and ethics, I follow New Political Theology while offering an overtly political feminist theological ethics through contextual analysis, building a constructive model of formation via the medium of preaching. The reason for this is that I am concerned that the body itself and embodied experience is not central to New Political Theology, thus I add to it my feminist critique and practical-pastoral lens. Here, theology itself is exposed for attempts to pretend that theology is or can ever be divorced from the everyday of our lives or, said alternatively: all thinking is fundamentally connected to the real of our actual lives, and any divisions between them are false at their core.⁶⁰ I do this work in a body that is sexed female and is read through a gender-binary lens as female. I consciously bring my work as a feminist

⁵⁹ This commitment weaves into Haker’s work at all points. She notes in her recent work on political theology in a post-Christian world that “Political theology stands for the relation of the public political and moral discourse and theology’s own ethical reflection on four intersecting levels. First, it reflects on a person’s values, commitments, and goods; second, on these values as socially mediated, in expressed in habits or dispositions; third, it reflects on the normative principles of action; and fourth, on the structures of justice.” See: Hille Haker, “Political Theology in a Post-Christian World,” 555.

⁶⁰ One example of this is the way that Sartre, Camus, and de Beauvoir as existentialists argued for the removal of the age of consent in French law, which was directly connected to the actions in their own lives, which included de Beauvoir grooming her high school students for sexual dalliances with her and Sartre, for which she lost her teaching license. See: Carole Seymour-Jones, *A Dangerous Liaison* (New York: Arrow Press, 2009).

minister to bear in critique of Christian Nationalism, pointing toward another way to be Christian that is rooted in *shalom*, justice, solidarity, and human becoming.⁶¹

My work is consciously a theological ethics because fundamentally, the political is ethical. This should be obvious in view of the commitments of the historic New Political Theology. Additionally, as a feminist political theological ethics of formation in that my concern is fundamentally seeking to form both individuals, myself, and a community so that we might truly be and become Christian in the face of American Christian Nationalism.

Herein I will explore my efforts through analysis of my preaching, which is the most consistent and accessible artifact of my efforts in the church. The turn to sermons for the exploration of a feminist political theological ethics of formation is in part because I seek to offer a contextual ethics and the act of preaching lays bare my efforts at forming a particular kind of community capable of critique and resistance to American Christian Nationalism.⁶² The sermon is one of clearest artifacts for identifying the ethical formation attempted by any minister. Not only this, but given that I am the one doing the preaching, the sermons evidence the ways in which this ethical formation is achieved through my embodied action and presence. For as a feminist political theological ethics, my work is grounded in a deep awareness that I am seeking to form both the *individuals* in the community and *the community* toward becoming a particular kind of community: one that is oriented toward life and steeled against the operations of death dealing in our world.

⁶¹ I write *shalom* for two reasons: 1) it is the word and Hebrew Bible's conception for peace in a wholistic sense (beyond what we often think of with the English word "peace"); 2) I will explore this concept in the final chapter.

⁶² I am grateful here to Hille Haker for encouraging me to follow her work in *Critical Political Ethics* in naming what I am likewise doing in my dissertation as a materialist, contextual ethics as this is the reason I turn to the sermon above any other.

Before I make this turn to the sermons and analysis of my vision for ethical formation, I will proceed with two things: (1) I will conclude this chapter by offering, without edit, my first two sermons that I gave at Colonial Church as they begin to make clear the vision that I will analyze in the subsequent chapters; and (2) I will turn to two conversation partners whose work is that of New Political Theologians/preachers: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Dorothee Sölle. I do so because their work not only appears throughout my own and they both influence my self-understanding as a pastor/ethicist/activist, but additionally, because exploring their work grounds the ways in which New Political Theology shapes my own understanding of my theo-ethical task as a minister and my vision for a feminist political theological ethics of formation. Here then is my first sermon that I preached as a guest speaker at Colonial Church as we turned from 2015 to 2016, little knowing or anticipating that Donald Trump would become the 45th president of the United States and little aware of how true this sermon would prophetically name my work and ethical vision when I came to the church as a new minister two years later in January of 2018.

Excurses: Sermons

Sermon #1: “On Being Christian” (Given on December 27, 2015)

It has been said that one only preaches one sermon with their life. While I know mine is something like: “God is love, live that love in yourself and then together with all of the earth (on the social level this is justice and shalom),” the particular manifestations of this life sermon are particularized in view of the context, which in this case, is my work as a minister at Colonial Church.

The first time I preached at Colonial, I was a guest preacher on the last Sunday of December 2015. I am struck by that sermon for many reasons, one of them being that I preached

it in the midst of the presidential cycle that culminated in the presidency of Donald Trump but at a moment when the thought of him actually becoming president had not yet occurred to me as an actual possibility.

Even though I knew only what I outlined in the introduction in terms of the history of the Colonial Church community, my initial sermon was a harbinger of what would be visible and present in the subsequent years since I have been an ordained staff member, so I will begin by turning to that first address in order to highlight some of what would become my clear sense of ethical work and vision as a pastor in this church.

Sermon Text

Beloved let us love one another because love is from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God, whoever does not love does not know God for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way, God sent the only son into the world so that we might live through him. And this is love: that we love God, but that God loved us and sent God sent the son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God, if we love one another God lives in us and God's love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in God and God in us. Because God has given us the Spirit and we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent the son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the son of God and they abide in God. So we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love and those who abide in love, abide in God and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this that we may have boldness on the day of judgment because as God is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishment and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because God first loved us. Those who say, I love God and hate their siblings are liars. For those who do not love a sibling whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their siblings also.

— 1 John 4:7-21 (NRSV)

Well, good morning and welcome to the last Sunday of 2015! Kind of crazy, right?! Hasn't felt like it could be that late in December. Yet here we are.

I'm so glad to be here with you all this morning. For those of you who don't know, Greg Meland and Linda Rich-Meland (long-time Colonial members) have become adopted family/have adopted us—I'm not sure which way—my spouse, Andy, and myself. So we're so glad to be here with you.

As I was thinking about what I wanted to preach on this morning, I decided that I wanted to talk about *being Christian*. And I wanted to get at it in a particular way: by talking about love and fear and the interplay between the two and how there might be an invitation for all of us as we look toward 2016 regarding how we might live and be as persons who claim the name of Christ.

Now, I come to this task as far from the first person to ever preach a sermon on fear, let alone a as who has written or talked about fear before. And so I come to this by way of one of my favorite ethicists, H. Richard Niebuhr. He was a long-time professor at Yale and his brother wrote a prayer that many of you may know—“The Serenity Prayer.” In the prologue to his book *The Responsible Self* he makes an apologetic for the grounding for his work, that of a Christian moral philosophy. And he says that he’s both doing the work of philosophy in thinking about what it means to be human, and he also comes to the work from a particular location—as a person who follows Christ, who conceives of God as he has come to know this God through Christ. And so when we speak about fear and love, it’s something that all of us, whether we’re thinking about it as people of faith or not, these are things we’ve all both thought about and lived. And yet today I want to ask us to think about them as we think about what it means to be Christian.⁶³

My interest in preaching about fear and love doesn’t come out of the blue for me. It finds its grounding in the place where faith was first enlivened to me: John 3:16. And while this passage notes that God’s love became embodied to us in Christ, it seems clear that the opposite side of love is fear. I say this because as I was growing up, I lived with a deep sense of fear about God, a fear that even though I affirmed that God loved me, the truth of my lived experience made me believe that God didn’t really love me. Maybe some of you have struggled with that same thing: a disconnect from what you mentally affirm and what you actually believe in viewed of your lived experience and pain. Yet what does it mean to have a faith that is rooted deeply in an embodied sense that we are loved? How does love change and transform us?

Well, maybe another reason that I came to wanting to preach a sermon about fear and love is because of my work in my doctoral program. Last spring, I wrote a paper with a colleague of mine about the ethics of belief. In it we explored why it is that although we say things like we believe in the golden rule, or we believe in love, we see evidence of the failure of these affirmed beliefs in the way that we actually live our lives.

What is that failing about? How does that come to be? These questions, about the failure of our attested beliefs is what we together considered. One of the themes we took up in our paper was the operation of fear and how it functions to disrupt our ethical praxis. Now, maybe you’ve read a little bit about fear as there’s some wonderful psychology books on this topic, or maybe you’ve seen some really great social media posts about fear. So here are a few of my favorite Facebook posts about fear that I’ve seen over the last few weeks. The first notes that fear has only two causes: the thought of losing what you have or the thought of not getting what you want, fear.

And here’s a second: F-E-A-R, forget everything and run (I like that one!) or face

⁶³ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*.

everything and rise. Or this one: “Fear is the mind killer.”

Well, one doesn't have to pay too much attention to the news to notice that there's reason to fear. And while I'm not going to spend the sermon talking about all of the various stories that give us reason to fear, we know I could do so, right? For in the wake of the Paris shooting and bombings or the shooting in San Bernardino, there's been an uptick in violence against our Muslim brothers and sisters.

There was a wonderful piece written a few weeks ago by a man named Omar Hamid Al-Rikabi, he starts off, “I have a Muslim problem, I am a Christian pastor in North Texas, I am also the proud son of a Muslim immigrant family from the middle East and I have a very wonderful and large Muslim family...” He continues in his blog post to recount the tension that he himself feels, being both a Christian and a man with a Muslim name, a Muslim family, and a Muslim ethnic identity.⁶⁴

And he talks about how sometimes in the midst of our fears, we lose the ability to remember that his family and other Muslim families like his are wrestling with the same things that non-Muslims do. They have the same questions, such as:

Will my kids grow up and flourish in their life?

Will I leave a legacy that's in line with how I wish to be remembered?

Does he like me? (I hope that guy over there does as his name is Andy and he's my spouse!)

He goes on to say that acts of violence perpetuated by Muslim terrorists, are not reflective of a Muslim problem, but rather tell the story of a human problem. And he says that we need to get our story right because the Gospel of Christ doesn't discount anyone from grace and salvation...even terrorists. For instance, take Paul. I don't know if you remember him, but he seemed to have quite a penchant for killing Christians...and yet he ended up being the author of most of the New Testament. So what is at play when we fall into a space of fear? And what is operative when we don't see one another as human and where love becomes impeded from being lived out in our relationships with One other?

Forgive me for one moment for doing something that I never thought I would do in my life, let alone in a sermon, which is to reference Husserl and speak about phenomenology, Husserl was a philosopher and phenomenologist. Phenomenology is about the study of the phenomenon basically that you see in front of you. And he argued that when we see—that which is before us—that as rational beings we should be able to understand and to apprehend it. I can look at that and I can say, poinsettia those are lots of poinsettias, right? That's what they are. I should be able to understand this. However, he leaves open the possibility that we can engage in self-deception which interrupts our ability to rightly encounter the phenomenon, and that this misrecognition occurs for many reasons.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ See: Omar Hamid Al-Rikabi, “My Muslim Problem,” accessed December 26, 2015, <http://www.omarrikabi.com/my-muslim-problem/#sthash.yDj8VvK2.dpbs>

⁶⁵ Husserl's early notion of belief is basically evidentialist. The intending consciousness, given evidence (which is understood to be the experience of agreement between the phenomenon as 'meant' and the phenomenon as given—to say it another way, evidence is the experience of agreement between how we take something to be and how it really is), should believe. If there is an experience of disagreement (sometimes called a “disappointment”) between how

One of his students, Edith Stein, furthered his work and wrote at length about the failure of our sight that that transpires as our empathy becomes blocked. That happens to us and in our world today, right? We're living in this place sometimes that's structured by fear such that fear can actually prevent us from seeing the object or the person who is before us. Our sight thus becomes stymied by a sort of "hermeneutics of fear," meaning we see the world then not as it is, but we see the world through our fear. And when we're in this space, it transforms how we see each other and not for the better, but instead leads us to misapprehend, fear, and even hate one another, allowing for us to dehumanize each other because fear is all we see.⁶⁶

And so today, as we turn our sight toward 2016, having just celebrated Christmas as the time of God giving the greatest gift of love, I wonder: what type of faith will we live in 2016? What type of Christians will we be in this new year? Will we be a people who live in fear of people, or will we live as a people who believe that love always wins? Will we be a people who believes that love has come near, that love restores and redeems and transforms even the most broken person or thing?

Will we be shaped by love or by fear, my friends?

One of my favorite films is *Chocolat*. Have any of you seen it? Oh, great- that's a lot of you! That makes me happy. Ok, so here's the thing— I think this movie depicts a really great image for what faith can look like in our times. What I mean by this is that it shows the difference and options of choosing a faith rooted in fear versus one rooted in love. Quick plot summary: a free-spirited woman comes in on the wind to this small French hamlet during Lent...oh, and by the way: she's a chocolatier.⁶⁷ Scandal! Chocolate during Lent! As the story goes, in this town where everyone was expected to follow the rules, the mayor is rather peeved that this woman is tempting all of the faithful townspeople during Lent...with chocolate.

But there's something more than the making of chocolate that's transpiring in her little chocolate shop, for the chocolate itself is merely a pathway for people to come, be seen, and have safe space to as they discover that life can look otherwise than it has.

Into the shop come a woman who's been abused and finds safety; in comes a couple who had forgotten to love one another and find passion again; in come people to find life and joy and happiness that they had forgotten because they were so busy being good French Catholics.

something is meant and how it is given, we should revise the way we take something to be, in favor of how the thing is given. In Husserl's view, "the human being has to become what it is:" a rational animal. The ethical human being is the one who seeks to understand the world as it is given; the ethical life is the fully rational life, with beliefs guided by the principle of evidence. What we have in the early writings of Husserl is an ethics of belief that is teleological and evidentialist. Despite that the 'ethical' human will change their mind in the face of evidence, however, Husserl leaves open the possibility of self-deception, either willful or due to value-laden (and thus 'emotional') passive synthesis. For more see, for instance: Donn Welton, ed., *The Essential Husserl* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

⁶⁶ See, for instance: Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, ed. Waltraut Stein, 3rd ed. (Washington, D.C: ICS Publications, 1989).

⁶⁷ *Chocolat*, directed by Lasse Hallström (Miramax Pictures, 2000), Digital versatile disc (DVD).

And how many times does not faith operate that way for some of us—where faith becomes a list of morality codes: do and don't do this, make sure that you come to church and if you don't, God will send you to hell or something?

But what if instead faith isn't about abstaining from the wrong things, but faith is actually about letting oneself be found by love? Because it seems that that's actually a much more vulnerable thing, is it not? Faith that is rooted in love and opens us up to love instead of a faith rooted in fear which roots us in shame.

Love brings with it a type of vulnerability that opens us up in ways we never thought or expected. And yet, even as a song that was just sung before, some of us have known great pain in our lives, and so it feels a lot easier to close our hands and say, "I'm not going there." For when we live in that space of fear where we say, "I'm not going there," what we are really saying is, "I'm afraid. I'm afraid of what might happen if I opened my hands." And when we live in this space of fear, we have a few options of how we might interact and engage with the world. We either live in that fear where we feel constantly terrorized, we try to avoid our fears and then we're obsessed, OR we learn to live with our fears and in so doing we live courage as we discover that our fear can melt away.

Let me return for a minute to our text. The verb here for love in Greek, it's not a past tense word: love isn't a one and done sort of thing. Love is something that changes and transforms us over time. Love is that which invites and calls us forth over and over again; it's the way we turn toward each other. It's the way that we wake up and actually look ourselves in the mirror and try to give ourselves grace. It's the way that we move into a world that might look a lot less certain, but a world that is so much more rich and filled with the color and life that love gives and provides. THIS is what the perfecting love that drives our fear does in and to and through us.

I wanted to share a poem with you about this, it's called, "The World I Live In," by Mary Oliver.

I have refused to live
 locked in the orderly house of
 reasons and proofs.
 The world I live in and believe in
 is wider than that. And anyway,
 what's wrong with *Maybe*?
 You wouldn't believe what once or
 twice I have seen. I'll just
 tell you this:
 only if there are angels in your head will you
 ever, possibly, see one.⁶⁸

So as we move into this new year, I wonder what it would look like for us to move into the love of God, to be a people who are so transformed by it, who are so marked by it that we live in ways that don't make sense. What if we chose the perfecting love that drives out fear? What if we become more deeply a people who turn the other

⁶⁸ Mary Oliver, "The World I Live In," in *Felicity* (New York, Penguin Books: 2015), 11.

cheek, love our enemies, are willing to go to the point of death for people who've rejected us? Love invites and calls to us all and love also heals and restores us all.

Love opens us. It births within us new dreams, it enlivens the future and humanizes us to each other and even to ourselves.

Living love then is not about the absence of fear, but it's about the way that we, to quote a book, *Feel the Fear and do it Anyway*.⁶⁹ It's about the call of this Christ and a faith that says to us: "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God, whoever does not know love, does not know God, because God is love."

This is how God showed love among us, God sent the one and only son into the world that we might live through Christ. This is love. Not that we loved God, but that God loved us and sent the son as a sacrifice for our sin. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another for no one has ever seen God. But if we love one another God lives in us and God's love is made complete in us. This is how we know that we live in God and God in us. God has given us God's Spirit and we have seen and testified that the God has sent the son to be the savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know, and we rely upon the love that God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love, lives in God. This is how love is made complete among us, so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment.

In this world, we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love, but perfect or perfecting love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because God first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a sibling is a liar, for whoever does not love their brother or sister who they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. And God has given us this command. Anyone who loves God must also love their siblings.

May our 2016 be filled and transformed by the love of God and may it change our fear into a faith that changes our world. Amen.⁷⁰

In this sermon I am asking the congregation as individuals and as a community to confront fear, to live responsibly, to consider the call to who they will be as a community and what the call of justice asks of each of them. Fundamentally, I am asking them to consider the critical role of the cross in shaping their relationship to themselves as individuals and as an institution so that they might be able to show up as Christian persons in a world where (as we

⁶⁹ Susan Jeffers, *Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway*, 20th Anniversary ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006).

⁷⁰ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, "On Being Christian" (sermon given Colonial Church, Edina, MN, December 27, 2015), <https://sarawg.com/2015/12/28/on-being-christian-a-sermon-on-i-john-47-21/>.

will see during the Trump presidency and beyond) kids are put in cages and human rights are stripped from persons in the name of God. In so doing, I have already and rather unintentionally made clear what my work and sense of call as a minister in this community will be: to lead a chocolate filled resistance to the bourgeois, privatized faith prevalent in the community and turn toward a vision of liberation for us all.

Sermon #2: "In Spirit and in Truth" Given on January 21, 2018

This second sermon was given on January 21, 2018 and was my first sermon as a member of the ministerial staff. The two intervening years between my original sermon at the church and this one were long. Trump was elected in the fall of 2016 and as I noted earlier, it was on account of this and my wrestling with my own work in view of my identities as a white woman who was raised inside of suburban Minnesotan evangelicalism, that I became convinced that part of my ethical task would be returning to my people to work out a political theological ethics as a minister in the community. On my drive to preach my first sermon, I blasted (on repeat) the below song from Taylor Swift:

They say I did something bad
Then why's it feel so good?
They say I did something bad
But why's it feel so good?
Most fun I ever had
And I'd do it over and over and over again if I could
It just felt so good, good
....
They're burning all the witches, even if you aren't one
They got their pitchforks and proof
Their receipts and reasons
They're burning all the witches, even if you aren't one
So light me up (light me up), light me up (light me up)
Light me up, go ahead and light me up (light me up)
Light me up (light me up), light me up (light me up)
Light me up (light me up), light me up (light me up)

They say I did something bad
 Then why's it feel so good?
 They say I did something bad
 But why's it feel so good?
 Most fun I ever had
 And I'd do it over and over and over again if I could
 It just felt so good, good

Oh, you say I did something bad
 Then why's it feel so good, good?
 So bad, why's it feel so good?
 Why's it feel, why's it feel so good? (Bad)
 It just felt so good, good.

—Taylor Swift, “I Did Something Bad”⁷¹

This song resonated for me and symbolized the step I was knowingly about to take. On the one hand, as a woman raised inside of a deeply sexist form of Christianity, my performance of self-hood was an act of defiance and resistance, for I was “doing something bad” by daring to myself and become a minister, albeit “something that felt so good.” Yet this act was not just for myself, but for greater justice and equality in the world and in the church, and as I drove to preach that first sermon it was with a deep sense that I carried in my bones and task as a minister the working out of the legacy of violence against women in and by the congregational tradition and larger Christian movement.

That morning I knew that unlike the women at Salem and throughout history, that no matter what happened, the congregants could not kill me. For me, to show up as this sort of self who could name “so light me up,” was evidence of my personal work. I was learning to refuse

⁷¹ Taylor Swift, “I Did Something Bad,” Track 3 on *Reputation* (Big Machine, 2017), compact disc (CD).

the Hegelian master-slave relationally⁷² and instead to take up my own agency and power.

Finally, I was aware that by moving to this community, I was moving away from safety and in ways was risking my own well-being in order to participate in the prophetic task of a critical theological ethics through my very being and presence in the community. Therefore, I needed to ground myself in an awareness that: (1) resistance would be assured (as in “They got their pitchforks and proof, their receipts and reasons...They're burning all the witches, even if you aren't one.”; and yet (2) I would survive no matter what happened (“so light me up”) and; (3) that the task I was engaging was all the more necessary in the face of a bourgeois evangelical white Christianity that had made Trump a possibility. So, I showed up for that first sermon to speak forth truths that were deep inside of my own skin, inviting the community to live their own truths as well.

Sermon Text

¹ Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John” ²—although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized— ³ he left Judea and started back to Galilee. ⁴ But he had to go through Samaria. ⁵ So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” ⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” ¹¹ The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” ¹³ Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” ¹⁵ The woman

⁷² See: G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford Press, 1977).

said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” ¹⁷ The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” ¹⁹ The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” ²¹ Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” ²⁵ The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” ²⁶ Jesus said to her, “I am he,⁷³ the one who is speaking to you.”

- John 4:1-26 (NRSV)

Well, good morning. Let’s pray: God we give you thanks— for this morning and this place, and that you are a God who shows up in the everydayness of our lives...at the wells and the water coolers; at the fireplaces and around tables. God, be with us and meet us here. It’s in the name of Christ that we pray and give thanks. Amen.

Well, so hi. I’m Sara. If you don’t know that yet, then you weren’t here earlier or you were sleeping. When I knew I was going to have the opportunity to preach today, I had a few goals: (1) I didn’t want to preach a bad sermon; (2) In view of the work we are doing with ReForming (where we are intentionally trying to listen to where God’s Spirit is inviting us in this next season) I wanted my sermon to be a part of the discernment and listening that we are all doing together; (3) I also wanted you to know a little bit about how I roll (I like to ask questions) and to introduce myself to you; and finally (4) I hoped to be an encouragement to you as we continue on this good journey together. So welcome.

I titled this sermon “In Spirit and In Truth.” I was originally going to preach on something else, but following the conversation last week with the consultant from TAG, I kept on coming back to this passage in John and the notion at the end about “in Spirit and in truth.” And here’s why...

One of the things that stood out to me the most from the consultant’s presentation was when he started out by saying “When we go into these spaces with churches or communities, one of the things we want to affirm is that **the answer is already in this room.**”

The answer is already in this room.

Their job as consultants is not to come in and tell us: “Here’s how you are going to be the church.” “Here’s what it looks like...” “Here’s the cookie cutter solution.” No,

⁷³ John 4:26 Gk *I am*

their job is to affirm and reflect back to us that which we already know God has been stirring—those places of passion, of joy, of longing...

God is already here. We just get to listen...and then, together, create and see what happens. Said another way, it's a reminder that **the answer is already in this room.**

That's why on Wednesday night when Carter was out of town and he asked if I wanted to talk with the Senior Highers, I was like: "Sure! That's great." (And then I walked in the room and wondered what I was doing. Why am I here?! FYI- if you are a senior higher the deal is that individually, I think you are great, but you are really hard to read as a group, and I'm never quite sure how to talk with you all as I haven't hung out with a group of senior highers in a long time). So I took a breath and got all of my resolve together to act like a good adult and got to spend some time with them. Now, I went into that space not with some big lecture or sermon, but instead we, together, read this passage from John.

Everyone took a verse and we went around the room. One of the things I said early on as some of the students were stumbling over words (that they never read—because who talks about Samaritans in their daily life?!). So they are reading along and you can hear the embarrassment as some of them don't know how to pronounce things and so I asked them to pause and noted it's OK to not know because we aren't going to judge each other—inviting them, if you don't know the words, no problem just keep reading. I told them we are going to do the same thing that some pastors do, it's called a Text Study. A text study is where a group gets together, they all read the text together and then individually and collectively talk about what came up for them as they read, noting what stood out to them.

As a part of doing our own Text Study then, I put the students into groups and asked them to share: (1) Did anything stand out? Did anything strike you as weird? Did anything make you happy? Upset? Angry? What were those things? Please share those with the group. (2) I asked them to also notice if they had any questions about the passage and to share those with the group. So we spent some time in the groups and when we came back together, the students shared. One of my favorite responses: "*Jesus is sassy.*" Here are some others:

"Jesus crosses boundaries."

"Jesus accepts her."

"Did you notice how he WAS I AM HE the whole time but it's only at the end that he's all like...IT'S ME!"

"I think about how everyone should be able to have access to water."

And then they shared some of their questions. Questions like: "*I wonder if the woman felt OK with not having a husband? Was she ashamed or not?*"

"What does it mean to worship in Spirit and in Truth?" (Thank you!)

So why did I do this exercise? Well, one of the reasons is because I didn't know them and I wasn't about to walk into a group of senior highers and be like: "Hi, I'm Sara, and I'm the pastor and I have all the answers." (as if that would actually ever be the case). The second reason I did this is because I am a firm believer that we all have moral agency; we are all persons who carry the image of God in us. As scripture says, there is a priesthood of all believers and all of our voices and gifts matter.

This means that you and your story and the things that you know and have experienced—the sorrow and the pain, and in the joy—you teach me, and we teach each other about the goodness of grace and love. And if we are concerned that young people leave church, then wouldn't we want to affirm that the faith is already theirs? That this God loves them precisely in their story— in the passions that make their hearts burn? In their wondering? This faith is a faith that is ours and I wanted them to know that, just as I want that for all of us for, as the consultant reminded us: **The answer is already in this room.**

So let's return to the passage and I'll give you a bit of context that I didn't give to the students. One of the things that seems clear right away is that the Samaritans and the Jews weren't exactly best friends. There are reasons and some history behind this. The conflict was rooted in a struggle about who understood God rightly (because, you know, humans have never struggled with this!). They had a long-term disagreement about where to worship God/where the sacredness of God's presence dwelt. They also diverged in their opinions about what counted as the sacred text. Additionally, there were rumors and in-fighting related to if there had been intermarriage amongst the Samaritans and the Gentiles, and what this meant for their being the people of God (this stemmed from the Babylonian Captivity). So you have the Samaritans believing that God showed up at Mt. Gerizim whereas the Jews believe that God's presence was at the temple in Jerusalem. And never the twain shall meet. "We have the true access to God!" Yells the one. To which the other responds: "No, we do!"

And yet here, in this moment, at this well, Jesus (who is a Jew) and a Samaritan woman (no less) come together. Jesus talks with the Samaritan woman, in spite of the fact that these groups did not talk or interact with one another. This engagement between Jesus and the woman was a type of "boundary crossing"—of moving across the room and the divides between humans because of our differences in order to see, hear, and be with one another. In this space between them, power and vulnerability is exchanged as Jesus, who is thirsty and cannot get a drink without this woman, is vulnerable before her. And the woman shows her vulnerability in asking if he realizes that she is a Samaritan woman (acknowledging that she know he is not supposed to be talking with her).

Now the book of John is a study of polemics in many ways—light is contracted with darkness, life with death, etc. John employs these binaries in order to make his point: Jesus is always the true light, the vine, the good shepherd, the water, the bread of life over against the darkness, the thief, and being cut off. And often in the book of John we see that the people we expect, or the stories we think are the "right person" who will "get it" is often *not* the person who apprehends who Christ is. So just to remind you (or to let you know) in John 3 a religious leader named Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the cover of the night (night). And then, in chapter 4 a Samaritan (!) woman comes to Jesus in the day (notice- day is the signal of faith over-against the night). We have a signal from John then in chapters 3-4: with the light we know there is something of light, faith, and goodness going on. Yet, so often when we read chapter 4, we think of, or have been taught to think, that this is a story of a "sinful woman". But I'd like to inquire: where do we read that she is particularly sinful? Does Jesus say this? Does she ask for forgiveness? This is just the story of a Samaritan woman who comes and meets Jesus at the well and

they begin having this conversation. Jesus sees her and it opens up space for them to talk about where God dwells.

David Lose, both a pastor and former professor at Luther Seminary, notes that how we read this passage says a lot about us. If we think this is the story of a woman who is a victim, who was sinful, it might tell us what *we* bring to texts—where we have presumptions about what we see in a frame. What happens then as we sit with the picture and wonder if there are other ways to see a text? What if we ask some questions about our presumptions about what is going on in the story? What if we wonder and allow God’s Spirit to open up new ways to see?⁷⁴

So what if instead we see this as a story as both a “boundary crossing” and a tale of one of the very first disciples and evangelists? The story about a woman who, unlike Nicodemus, actually understood who Jesus was. She notes: “I see you are a prophet.” And so she pushes him and questions him, like a student of a Rabbi would. In fact, she becomes the first recorded evangelist who not only apprehends who Jesus is, but then goes to tell the whole town about her experience and encounter with Jesus.

She is a moral agent, a person who is seen by Christ, and this connection opens her up; she asks for living water. And in the book of John, water is about faith- it symbolizes and indicates the ones who understand what God is about in Christ. There is no word of judgment from Christ here in John 4, there is no comment about the Samaritan woman being sinful, no, instead Jesus engages with her and talks with her like a Rabbi about where God shows up. And she is the first recorded witness.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ See: David Lose, “Commentary on John 4:1-42,” Working Preacher, February 2, 2014, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1920. He writes: “For this is a passage and story that has, in my opinion, been notoriously misinterpreted, in part because we read it in isolation of the rest of John’s gospel and in part because of the Church’s history of bad treatment of women. So let me lay my cards on the table: I don’t think the Samaritan woman is a prostitute. I don’t think that she has a shady past. And I don’t think Jesus forgives her. Rather, I think he calls her not to repentance but to life-giving faith. Allow me to explain...”

⁷⁵ Rev. Dr. Karoline Lewis, Professor at Luther Seminary, has some wonderful commentary on this. “She is a woman, she has no name, but she meets Jesus at noon, in full daylight. And the contrast between their conversations with Jesus is even more extraordinary. Whereas Nicodemus is unable to move beyond the confines of his religious system, the Samaritan moves outside of her religious expectations and engages Jesus in theological debate (4:20). Whereas Nicodemus cannot hear that Jesus is sent by God (3:17), the woman at the well hears the actual name of God, “I AM” (4:26—“he” in the NRSV is not in the Greek text). While Nicodemus’s last questioning words to Jesus expose his disbelief, “How can this be?” the last words of the woman at the well, also posed as a question, “He cannot be the Christ, can he?” lead her to witness to her whole town.” ... “Perhaps the extraordinary aspect of this text is not simply that Jesus is for her, but that she becomes a witness for him.” Also: “The Samaritan woman at the well is not a passive recipient of Jesus’ offer. She immediately recognizes the societal barriers and boundaries that keep her in her place (4:9) but at the same time challenges Jesus’ authority over and against the ancestors of the faith (4:12). Like Nicodemus, she first interprets Jesus’ words on a literal level, but she is able to ask for what Jesus has to offer rather than question the possibility (4:15). She is not certain that Jesus is the Christ (4:29—the syntax of the Greek expects a negative answer), but she does not let that stop her from leaving behind her water jar, going into the city, and inviting the people to their own encounter with Jesus. She demonstrates what can happen when we actually engage in conversation and questions about our faith. The woman at the well shows us that faith is about dialogue, about growth and change. It is not about having all the answers. If we think we have all the answers, if we are content with our doctrinal constructs, if we believe more in our own convictions than the possibility of revelation, we will be left to ponder whether or not God will choose to be made known.” See: Karoline Lewis, “Commentary on

What then is the invitation to us about maybe even the parts of our own stories, our lives, and our histories that we would rather not be seen; the places we feel are beyond love, beyond grace?

And what if the gospel is not just about that person out there who is on the margins and needs forgiveness, but it's about living inward and opening ourselves to experience God's love and forgiveness for ourselves?

What if it's about allowing God to do the "boundary-crossing" as Jesus did here, to also love us?

What does this text invite from us and speak to us?

What does it enliven in you as you consider the invitations of God that are already in this room?

What does it mean for us to be people who know ourselves as seen by God and to then be people who turn toward and see others?

To be people who cross boundaries, because we have known a God who crosses boundaries to meet us in the very realness of our lives?

The answer is in this room. The answers are already here in this room.

So we come to this part about "in Spirit and in truth," about whose traditions and temple were the location of the sacred, and Jesus does a few amazing things. First of all, he dismisses the notion that there is a physical location that is the only space where God shows up. It's not Jerusalem, he says, it's not here on this mountain, it's everywhere. Additionally, he invokes a reference in verse 26 to what happened when Moses encountered God in the burning bush and says: "I AM." Jesus signals that he is this "I AM." It's a reminder that this presence of God shows up not only in the burning bushes, at the well, but also here in this space—in the midst of our celebrations about the Vikings' wins (hopefully!). This claim of "I AM" by Jesus is in conversation with John 2 where Jesus says that if you destroy the temple he will rebuild it, but he is the temple and the spirit is now not in any location, but is available everywhere. And yet, how many times in our lives do we still believe that some external authority has to tell us the truth about God? As if the pastor has special access to the answers?

What has God been inviting and already been cultivating in your spirit? Where are the places where God has shown up at the "wells" in your life? And how do we actually believe that this God of love is actually for all of us?

The answer is already in this room.

So what happens when we allow ourselves to be seen? What happens when we believe the "I AM" is FOR US? What unfolds when we recognize that the divine is in our midst- that the God who already is, is with us at the water coolers and in the dailyness of loving our families, of messing up, and being human. This is the God of I AM—the sacred space, is now every space, and the knowledge of God isn't located in some external holy mountain or temple, but with and in us.

As we talk about ReForming, we talk about how the world has changed and people no longer come to church the way they used to. But we ourselves have changed.

How many of you had cell phones 20 years ago? And how many of you have one now? How many of you want to check it right now (FYI- if I'm ever preaching and you look at your phone, I'll just assume you are tweeting a great quote that you wanted to share with your followers!). We have changed too. And do we not believe that this God— who has shown up throughout history—will continue to show up? We don't have to flail about then in this time of discernment, no, we just have to root in and listen more deeply, allowing ourselves to be seen in **this** time and space. God isn't on some mountaintop, nor is God located somewhere in some past glory day. God is here. God is in our homes. God is in our schools and in our work. And we are present in that space and in this time, which is why Christ reminds us that faith is all around:

“In spirit and in truth.”

“In spirit and in truth.”

The answer is already in this room.

So may we be people who listen in, people who are willing to open ourselves to the whisperings of the Spirit, people who let each other, those others, and God “trouble” us and open us up to questions and new ways of seeing. And in all of this, may we trust that the I AM who met Moses in a burning bush, the I AM who met a Samaritan woman at a well, the I AM who has shown up throughout history, is the same I AM who loves you, who loves me, and who is doing a new thing amongst all who live in Spirit and in truth.

The answer is already in this room.

So may this grace and love, may freedom and goodness be yours and be ours. And may we be a people who say YES to whatever God's Spirit might invite us to next as we ReForm. In spirit and in truth...for **the answer is already in this room**. May God give us grace to listen and follow in faith. Amen.⁷⁶

While this is just an initial foray into two of the sermons, in the next chapters I will explore how I understand my task of a feminist political ethics of formation. I will do so in conversation with the work of Bonhoeffer and Sölle. I do so for numerous reasons. Not only because they are both significant fashioners of the New Political Theology (though, as I will argue, Bonhoeffer anticipates the post-Shoah theological turn and as such I include him in this genealogy), but also because each appear throughout my sermons (both implicitly and explicitly) as important conversation partners and mentors for me. Additionally, each of their work is also

⁷⁶ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, “In Spirit and in Truth” (sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, January 21, 2018), <https://sarawg.com/2018/01/21/in-spirit-in-truth-a-sermon-on-john-41-26/>.

rooted in contextual, embodied praxis in the midst of communities, which is of particular interest to me in my work as a minister, seeking to form a people and myself to be Christians in the face of Christian Nationalism. Finally, they each serve as models of theologians whose work transgresses normative theological imaginations which are rooted in systematic and dogmatic theology, each articulating a theological ethics, with focus on the interplay between theo-ethical imagination, ethical formation, and praxis (activism/the work of justice).

In these ways, I turn to them not only as historical resources, but because the work of ministering in this time can be lonely at times. Through conversation and engagement with Bonhoeffer and Sölle, I have models and co-conspirators whose work has aided me greatly in my own reaching for expansion of my theological imagination on account of the theological and methodologically resources of my seminary education largely failing to substantively aid my ability to pastor in the face of American Christian Nationalism.

CHAPTER THREE
DIETRICH BONHOEFFER AND ETHICAL FORMATION
FOR A “WORLD COME OF AGE”

They guild their houses
In preparation for the King
And the line the sidewalks
With every sort of shiny thing
They will be surprised
When they hear him say

Take me to the alley
Take me to the afflicted ones
Take me to the lonely ones who somehow
Lost their way
Let them hear me say
I am your friend
Come to my table
Rest here in my garden
You will have a pardon.

—Gregory Porter, “Take Me to the Alley”¹

As noted in the prior chapter, though there are many differences between our stories and contexts, in these next two chapters I turn to the work of Sölle and Bonhoeffer because there are also many echoes between my and their wrestling, questions, identities, and approaches. Bonhoeffer, in particular, has long been important to my development as an ethicist and minister. There are many reasons for this, including that I have likewise been formed by the question of what it means to be a person and people (self and church) who follow Christ and live as

¹ Gregory Porter, “Take Me to the Alley,” track 3 on *Take Me to the Alley*, Blue Note Records, 2016, compact disc (CD).

Christians in the world (this, for Bonhoeffer, is the life of discipleship).² Even more so, it is his work from *Letters and Papers from Prison* that resonates with my attempts to reach for what it means to be church and to be and become Christian in a time in the United States where increasingly people have “come of age” and are leaving behind Christian religion while, at the same time, much of the white, Christian Church in America is interested in its self-preservation, steeped in white supremacy and promises of that we will be “made great again” as Trump has offered.³

Situating Bonhoeffer⁴

Bonhoeffer’s Biography

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born on February 4, 1906 in Breslau, Prussia. Raised in an intellectual family—his father was a psychiatrist, and his mother was a teacher—his intellectual

² What he calls “discipleship” I name as “formation.” This distinction is important because discipleship is grounded in his work and general Christian catechesis, as that forged via what Bonhoeffer names “simple obedience” and, if part of the concern is to help develop Christians who can resist, then the word and practice of seeking Christian “formation” captures more of that necessary work of cultivation of the agency of the self and one’s tending to their own moral formation as a thinking, embodied person and not as one who simply obeys.

³ Even though I grew up an evangelical, I was shocked by the profound and consistent support of Donald Trump by evangelicals both through the 2016 election process up until the present. For a deeper analysis of this phenomenon, see: Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long*. That the church exists in a “world come of age” is evidenced in part by the exodus of so many Americans both from church and Christian identity in the past years: they have/we have “grown up.” For more on this see, for instance: Michael Lipka, “A Closer Look at America’s Rapidly Growing Religious ‘Nones,’” *Pew Research Center*, May 15, 2015 <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/13/a-closer-look-at-americas-rapidly-growing-religious-nones/>. Also, note that I refer to *Letters and Papers from Prison* as if they are a collected, coherent body of work. They were not. They were exactly what the English name for the collection states: they were letters and papers. However, I treat them as one body of work both because they are now gathered as such AND because they represent and reflect a body of thought that he is wrestling with over a particular period of time. Thus, to my mind, they can be engaged with as one text. See: Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

⁴ There are many books with helpful commentary on Bonhoeffer’s coming of age. These include the classic text by Bethge: Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologian, Christian, Man for His Times: A Biography*, ed. Victoria Barnett, trans. Eric Mosbacher, Peter and Betty Ross, Frank Clarke, and William Glen-Doepel (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). Also, see: Reggie L. Williams, *Bonhoeffer’s Black Jesus*; Michael DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer’s Theological Formation: Berlin, Barth, and Protestant Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Larry Rasmussen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Reality and Resistance* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

curiosity was stoked from a young age. Bonhoeffer's childhood was greatly impacted by the legacy of World War I, and he decided to pursue a course of study in theology, graduating with his doctorate from Berlin University in 1927. After completing his studies, he spent a year as a postdoctoral instructor Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Bonhoeffer's time in New York, particularly his experiences in and with the African American church community of Harlem, left a decided impression on Bonhoeffer's political theology, pastoral leadership, and spirituality.⁵

Bonhoeffer returned to Germany in 1931 and served as a lecturer at Berlin University. He was then appointed to the *World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches*. Having only recently been ordained as a Lutheran minister, the rise of the National Socialist Democratic Workers Party (NSDAP) into power in 1933 made what would become an indelible and permanent mark in Bonhoeffer's future.

Two days after Hitler became Chancellor, Bonhoeffer delivered his now famous radio address "The Church and the Jewish Question," in which he prophetically spoke out against National Socialism, naming it an "idolatrous cult." In his speech, he said, prophetically: "We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice, we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself."⁶

⁵ For a wonderful account of the importance of this time in Bonhoeffer's life, see: Williams, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*.

⁶ The Dietrich Bonhoeffer Institute notes: "Two days after Hitler's election as Chancellor in January 1933, Bonhoeffer delivered a radio address criticizing the concept of 'The Fuhrer,' and in particular the danger of an idolatrous cult. His radio broadcast was cut off mid-air." See: "Biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer," *The Dietrich Bonhoeffer Institute*, accessed: May 4, 2021, <https://tdbi.org/dietrich-bonhoeffer/>. The image here is, as my advisor Dr. Hille Haker noted, "a difficult metaphor, alluding to stopping the wheel of fortune." It is a way of saying that though the wheel already has spokes, one must insert something into the spokes of the wheel in order to interrupt its operation.

Even in the early days of Nazi rule, there was a clear schism in the Lutheran church between those who supported the Nazi party and those opposed to its easy marriage with Hitler. Bonhoeffer was one of the earliest and staunchest church opposition leaders. He, along with others opposed to the Nazi aligned churches and leaders, became known as members of the Confessing Church, a movement that arose the Barmen Declaration of 1934.⁷

Not surprisingly, the development of the Confessing Church was not welcomed by the Nazi party leadership, and they quickly began to sanction members of the Confessing Church. In order to provide support for these churches and the formation of their leaders, the Confessing Church developed an underground seminary outside of the confines of the state-funded and run university system, now under the control of Hitler's regime. In 1935 Bonhoeffer became the head of the underground seminary at Finkenwalde in Northern Germany. It was in this context that Bonhoeffer wrote *Cost of Discipleship*.⁸ Only two years later, in August 1937, Himmler decreed the education of Confessing Church pastors illegal. The following month, the Gestapo closed the seminary in Finkenwalde and arrested many Confessing Church pastors, together with former Finkenwalde students.

Over the next two years, Bonhoeffer traveled throughout Germany in support of Confessing Church ministers and students. In 1939 he received and accepted an invitation to return to Union Seminary, a decision that Karl Barth pushed him to consider but one which Bonhoeffer soon regretted. The reason for this is that he felt, as a German Christian, it was

⁷ James R. Edwards, "The Barmen Declaration and the Fall of the Berlin Wall," *The Edwards Epistle* 19, no. 4 (Spring 2011): 1-4.

⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, vol. 4, *The Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Series*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett and Barbara Wojhoski (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003).

necessary for him to be present in the country for the struggle with National Socialism in order that he might be able to contribute to the reconstruction of life in Germany after the war.⁹ To employ Bonhoeffer's language, the "cost of discipleship" demanded that he faced whatever suffering might come to him as a result of faithfulness to the gospel. As he wrote to Reinhold Niebuhr:

I have come to the conclusion that I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period in our national history alongside Christians in Germany. I can have no right to reconstruct Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share in the trials of this period along with my people. My brothers in the Synod of the Confessing Church decided that I would get away. It may be that they were right when they urged me to do so; but it was wrong on my part to leave. Such a decision every person has to make for himself. Christians in Germany now stand before the frightful alternative of either willing the defeat of their own nation so that Christian civilization can live on, or to speak out for victory which will eventually destroy civilization. I know which of these alternatives I have to choose, but I cannot make the choice while I remain in safety.¹⁰

This commitment led Bonhoeffer not only to return to Germany but to work for the British secret service. He continued resisting the Nazi regime through direct action. Because of these actions, Bonhoeffer was arrested on April 5, 1943, and for the next year and a half he was imprisoned while awaiting his trial. In September 1944, his role in the July 20th Plot to assassinate Hitler came to light and Bonhoeffer, along with other accused persons, was moved to Buchenwald and subsequently to the Flossenburg concentration camp.¹¹ In his biography on the life of

⁹ For a robust accounting of his response see: Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 736.

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "To Reinhold Niebuhr, End of June, 1939," in *Theological Education Underground*, vol. 15, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Series*, ed. by Victoria J. Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 210.

¹¹ Bonhoeffer was arrested because of his anti-Nazi activities and was then later implicated in the July 20th assassination attempt when his brother-in-law Hans von Dohnanyi's papers discussing the plot were discovered. Bonhoeffer's exact role in this attempted coup is debated. For more on this debate see, for instance: Fritz Stern and Elisabeth Sifton, *No Ordinary Men: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hans von Dohnanyi* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2013); Mark Nation, et al., *Bonhoeffer the Assassin? Challenging the Myth, Recovering His Call to Peacemaking* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013).

Bonhoeffer, his close friend Eberhard Bethge reports that as Bonhoeffer was led to his execution (after having led his final Sunday worship service), his last words were “This is the end—for me.”¹² Bonhoeffer was executed on April 9, 1945, just two weeks before United States soldiers liberated the camp.

Questions of Legacy: The U.S. Reception History¹³

Since Bonhoeffer’s death and the end of the Nazi regime, the content, meaning, and direction of Bonhoeffer’s theology has been contested. The earliest interpretive perspectives of Bonhoeffer’s work were penned by John Godsey and Hanfried Müller. Bethge disagreed with their interpretations and sought to articulate and preserve what he saw as Bonhoeffer’s true legacy.¹⁴ To this day, the figure of Dietrich Bonhoeffer remains *both* contested *and* politicized amongst widely divergent politics and theological perspectives, heralding Bonhoeffer as everything from “a prophet of secularization” to an “Evangelical martyr.”¹⁵

¹² Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 927.

¹³ I am grateful to Dr. Hille Haker for pointing out how this reception history is particularly American, especially in view of the influence of Eric Metaxas’ work in the United States. See: Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy: A Righteous Gentile vs. the Third Reich* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010).

¹⁴ Because Bethge was so focused on compiling all of Bonhoeffer’s works, Godsey and Müller penned the first interpretations of Bonhoeffer. The timing is significant for while Bethge knew Bonhoeffer better, Godsey and Müller’s books became the presumed “normative” interpretations against which Bethge then had to respond. Bethge complained that Müller did not do justice to the continuity between Bonhoeffer’s earlier theology and the work in *Letters and Papers from Prison (LPP)*. In order to counter such truncated understanding, Bethge feverishly attempted to publish all of Bonhoeffer’s work. See: John Godsey, *The Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London, SCM Press, 1960). Hanfried Müller, *Von der Kirche Zur Welt* (Hamburg-Bergstedt: Herbert Reich Evang. Verlag, 1956).

¹⁵ Many (wrongly) attribute this notion to Harvey Cox’s book: Harvey Cox, *Secular City* (London: SCM Press, 1965). I am, however, of the persuasion that Cox is much closer to Bonhoeffer than public parlance belies. The construction of Bonhoeffer as an Evangelical hero has come much later in the interpretive history (and is a particularly US interpretative tradition). This is largely due to the work of author Eric Metaxas who has been rightly criticized for sloppily knighting Bonhoeffer an Evangelical. His 2010 book, on Bonhoeffer (Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*), drew criticism from many, including other Evangelicals. See, for instance: Nancy Lukens, “Agenda-Driven Biography,” *Sojourners*, February 2011, <http://sojo.net/magazine/2011/02/agenda-driven-biography>. I find his interpretation and attempts to own the legacy of Bonhoeffer alarming especially in view of his virulent support of

Indeed, some have argued that Bonhoeffer was a classic “orthodox” Lutheran pastor/scholar with a coherent theological unity throughout his work.¹⁶ Others have contended that his work anticipates the “death of God theology.”¹⁷ Scholars have explored how later Bonhoeffer diverges from his earlier work,¹⁸ while others argue that his notion of “religionless

Trump and advocacy of violence against democrats. For instance, on November 6, 2020 he tweeted: Eric Metaxas, “Those who cheated will be hoist (sic) by their own petard, will like Haman be hanged on the very gallows they themselves erected. Ask God to give you eyes of faith to see the invisible reality. When ALL see it, our faith will be unnecessary. Thank God NOW, before He parts the Red Sea,” Twitter, November 6, 2020, 10:17 a.m., https://twitter.com/ericmetaxas/status/1324747636042354689?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw. Again, on April 28, 2021 he tweeted: Eric Metaxas, “FACT: The ‘worst attack on our democracy since the Civil War’ was when Democrats STOLE AN ELECTION from #WeThePeople—and then dared to pretend WE were the threat to democracy. Shame on them. They will not get away with this. Many are praying. God sees,” Twitter, April 28, 2021, 6:58 p.m., <https://twitter.com/ericmetaxas/status/1387556803949518850?lang=en>. Emma Green of the Atlantic conducted an interview with Metaxas in February 2021 that is quite illustrative of his positions. See: Emma Green, “Eric Metaxas Believes America Is Creeping Toward Nazi Germany,” *The Atlantic* (February 14, 2021), <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/02/eric-metaxas-2020-election-trump/617999/>.

¹⁶ To name Bonhoeffer as an Orthodox Lutheran is to say he holds to the historic creeds of the protestant church and general tenets of Lutheran theology. For instance: in the introduction to the 1978 translation of *Christ The Center* which is based upon Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s 1933 lectures on Christology, Edwin H. Richardson defends the publishing of these pieces on the grounds that Christology figures centrally throughout Bonhoeffer’s evolution of thought and, furthermore, because he believes that one needs to understand the early Bonhoeffer in order to make sense of the later. In fact, he goes so far as to argue that there is “a straight line of development” from these lectures on Christology through the end of Bonhoeffer’s work so much so that without knowing these earlier lectures one will miss the point and meaning of his discussion of “religionless Christianity” at the end of his life. See: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, trans. Edwin H. Robertson (San Francisco: Harper, 1960), 8-9 and 20-21. Hauerwas also believes that there is a strong continuity, and he dismisses any potential involvement that Bonhoeffer might have had in the plot to assassinate Hitler because such an action would have been at odds with his earlier pacifism. However, Hauerwas is in direct contradiction with Bethge on this point for Bethge noted that conversations about resistance to National Socialism was a frequent topic in the Bonhoeffer household and that Dietrich was very intentional in his decision to join the plot. See: Stanley Hauerwas, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Political Theology,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 20, no. 3 (2002): 17-39.

¹⁷ The “death of God theology” refers the way in which of traditional beliefs in God have lost their sway in a world marked by the enlightenment and secularity. Those who place Bonhoeffer in this lineage point to his wrestling with what it means to speak of God “in a world come of age” and anticipated what a non-religious interpretation looks like. For more on this theological tradition see, for instance: Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*. Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1968); John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); and William Franke, William, “The Deaths of God in Hegel and Nietzsche and the Crisis of Values in Secular Modernity and Post-secular Postmodernity,” *Religion and the Arts*. 11, no. 2 (2007): 214–241.

¹⁸ There are some who see this as a good thing and then there are those who have been perennially concerned by the fragmentary nature of this later work such Barth who wrote to Bethge before the publication of LPP in hopes to persuade Bethge that they ought not be published due to their fragmentary nature and his concern that they reflected an immature (and potentially dangerous) theology. Referenced in: Eberhard Bethge, “The Reception and

Christianity” is in continuity with Bonhoeffer’s earlier work even as it evolves in specific *theological* ways.¹⁹ All of this is to say that some people think Bonhoeffer is pointing toward a post-Christian theological imagination, while others argue that Bonhoeffer is much more classically Christian. My position is that indeed there is a both/and *and* a neither/nor to his evolving theological and praxis throughout his life.²⁰ Indeed, Bonhoeffer’s legacy is disputed not only because of his death (and inability to bear witness for himself) and his being seen as a modern martyr (which imbues a particular veneration that confers a type of sainthood), but because (as I will outline) his theological imagination evolved as he moved more deeply into the

Interpretation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer" *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 3 (1973): 13. There were also those who saw this divergence as a good thing such as those who were involved with the 1960 theoretical reflections on the secularization of society such as John A. Robinson, *Honest to God*, (London: SCM Press, 1963).

¹⁹ Wüstenberg argues that there are three distinct views of religion in Bonhoeffer: (1) The *positive* view- in his early writings and arising out of the influence of liberal theology and the influence of his teachers including Adolf von Harnack and Reinhold Seeberg; (2) The *critical view* of religion under the influence of Barth that shows up in his dissertation; (3) The *Non-religious* interpretation- religion had run its course and Christian faith needed to be a-religious. Ralf K. Wüstenberg, "Philosophical Influences on Bonhoeffer's 'Religionless Christianity,'" in *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought*, ed. Brian Gregor & Jens Zimmerman (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 138-139. One interesting evaluation is found in the work of Holte who reads Bonhoeffer in light of Kant, Nietzsche, and Levinas. I appreciate how he acknowledges that in Bonhoeffer’s evolution and evaluation of the “world come of age” is one where we can no longer return to the safety of childhood faith and put our trust in the divine intervention of an almighty father figure, rather, we have to take responsibility. This is that in part the move toward and into responsibility is the “being for the other.” It is, as Bonhoeffer notes in *LPP*, that Christians must now live in the world as if God was not. Though this is outside of the scope of this study, it would be interesting to pursue this connection to Levinas in greater depth in consideration of how one must face the radical demand of the other. Though this remains deeply Christological for Bonhoeffer, there is a way that the move is from a responsibility for the other to a responsibility to the other that is found in the demand of the other as Bonhoeffer was himself confronted by the other in the face of the Jew in Nazi Germany. Note, this is largely the turn I make in chapters 8-9. See also: Stine Holte, "Bonhoeffer's Notion of Maturity and the Possibility of Redemption," *Studia Theologica* 67, no. 2 (2013): 146. Congdon also sees a connection between the late and early Bonhoeffer, though he understands this as centered on a different concept of the church where the church moves out into the world in *Ethics* and *LPP*. See: David W. Congdon, "Bonhoeffer and Bultmann: Toward an Apocalyptic Rapprochement." *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 15, no. 2 (2013): 177.

²⁰ Against those who think that Bonhoeffer is wholly contiguous in his theological commitments there are three immediate critiques: (1) A review of the texts which evidences discontinuity and continuity of theological thought; (2) Bethge’s notes regarding the reception of *Letters and Papers from Prison (LPP)* by Bonhoeffer’s former students from Finkenwald for whom, upon reading the letters, “Bonhoeffer appeared in an unexpected light;” (Bethge, *Biography*, 889.) and; (3) Barth’s disregard for the later Bonhoeffer (Bethge, *Biography*, 289).

experience of suffering and bearing witness to the violence of the Nazi Regime.²¹ In the next section, I will analyze his evolution and focus on how his work, particularly in *Letters and Papers from Prison* where he explores “religionless Christianity,” anticipates the development of post-war New Political Theology in and for a “world come of age.”

Religionless Christianity in a World Come of Age

As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, one of the reasons that I turn to Bonhoeffer is on account of his wrestling in *Letters and Papers from Prison* with the notion of “religionless Christianity” in a “world come of age.”²² In this section I outline salient aspects of his thoughts, from his analysis of the modern situation to his non-metaphysical interpretation of Christianity to his naming of the ways that those who claim God must now live in the world.

Seeking to make sense of faith in view of his time, Bonhoeffer explores what Christianity means when metaphysical justifications have lost their significance to and for people. Demanding that God must be at the center and not at the boundary of human existence (contra private religion), it is an age, he argues, in which speech about God must cease and, in silence, come to face suffering in the world and the reality that the world has now come of age. Thus, any

²¹ In response to the plurality of early appropriations of Bonhoeffer, Bethge worked tirelessly to compile Bonhoeffer’s work and write a definite biography, for he believed that Bonhoeffer could only be rightly understood if read in full. Note: all of Bonhoeffer’s books are now in print and have been translated into English and are part of a wonderful series published by Fortress Press in 16 volumes. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Series*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett and Barbara Wojhoski (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press: 1996-2013). Also: Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*. It is also worth noting that while I will not cover the philosophical influences on his work at any length in this work, there are many others who have done so. See for instance: Charles Marsh, *Reclaiming Dietrich Bonhoeffer: The Promise of His Theology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); DeJonge, *Bonhoeffer’s Theological Formation*. Stephen Plant, “Bonhoeffer’s Intellectual Formation: Theology and Philosophy in His Thought,” in *Bonhoeffer’s Intellectual Formation: Theology and Philosophy in His Thought*, ed. Peter Frick (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 301-327.

²² In his letters he sketches out a book that he hopes wherein he will narrate his thoughts on these matters in three sections: (1) Taking stock of Christianity; (2) What is Christian Faith, Really? and; (3) Conclusions. *LPP*, 502.

talk of God in this “religionless Christianity” is that where Christ must be weak and powerless. This Christ and the life of faith in this age can only be made manifest in the “being-for-others” through prayer and by doing justice.

In an era where church attendance has seen a precipitous decline and those identifying as Christian has dwindled, I too have wrestled with what it means to be Christian and church in our time.²³ In a “world that has come of age,” people no longer need church in the same way—they are grown up and are aware of diverse ways of understanding and making sense of the meaning of life and spirituality; people often find more freedom outside of the church and so they have left it behind.²⁴ Meanwhile, those who have stayed in church are, in many ways, those who are either the most psychologically vulnerable and need the community formation and secure attachment that Church and Christian religion provides, and/or are those who espouse a form of Christianity that is explicitly connected to ideology and white supremacist identity politics, as is the case with the brand of American Christian Nationalism offered by white evangelical Christianity in the United States today.²⁵ Thus, it is precisely on the one hand to offer a Christianity that honors the coming of age of people in today’s culture—integrating psychology, and scientific knowledge in view of racism and other needs for justice in the political realm—

²³ For the latest on this see: Justin Nortey, “More Houses of Worship are Returning to Normal Operations, but In-Person Attendance is Unchanged Since Fall,” *Pew Research Center* (March 22, 2022), accessed online: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/03/22/more-houses-of-worship-are-returning-to-normal-operations-but-in-person-attendance-is-unchanged-since-fall/>.

²⁴ For more on this see, for instance: Albert Hunt, “The Younger Generation isn’t Having it,” *The Hill* (August 11, 2021), <https://thehill.com/opinion/campaign/567319-religion-and-politics-the-younger-generation-isnt-having-it/>.

²⁵ See, for instance: Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* and *White too Long*; Jonathon O’Donnell, “The Deliverance of the Administrative State: Deep State Conspiracism, Charismatic Demonology, and the Post-Truth Politics of American Christian Nationalism.” *Religion* 50, no. 4 (2020): 696–719. Perry, et al., “Culture Wars and Covid-19,” and “Prejudice and Pandemic in the Promised Land.” Samuel L. Perry, et al., “God’s Country in Black and Blue.” Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God*.

while also combating and critiquing the dominant brand of Christianity in the United States which seeks to re-assert dominance and univocal identity that I turn to Bonhoeffer as a conversation partner.

Speaking of God in a “World Come of Age”

What is this “world come of age” of which Bonhoeffer writes? Unlike the ages before it, in early 20th century Europe, and Germany particularly, faith in God could no longer be assumed. There are two aspects of Bonhoeffer's wrestling with faith in view of the “world come of age” that I want to highlight: (1) what this shift demands of the language and conception/content of faith, and (2) what this shift demands of/from (action) the Christian and community of faith. To the first aspect: how does one speak of God when the old ways of speaking and being church are no longer resonant with people?

While Bonhoeffer's recognition that the world had come of age is in large part a naming of the reality of Christianity's place in Europe following WWI, Bonhoeffer's refusal of traditional metaphysical theology in which God holds together the world like a puppet on a string also arose out of Bonhoeffer's reading of the Hebrew Bible while he was in prison.²⁶ He writes of this that if anyone wants to follow Christ, they must understand the law of grace, a grace that is rooted in the world. He writes that the way in which prisoners in the camps understand the “supernatural” has little to do with eschatology, rather it is connected to their embodied lives and experiences of suffering and pain.

²⁶ In this section, the reference to “metaphysical theology” refers to the tradition that justifies itself in unknowable origins of God and being itself. John W. de Gruchy, Eberhard Bethge: Interpreter Extraordinaire of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Modern Theology* 23:3 (2007): 356; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, edited by John W. DeGruchy, translated by Douglas Stephen Bax, vol. 3, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997): 9.

Thus, for Bonhoeffer, a “this-worldly” way of being and speaking must throw off its metaphysical trappings on the one hand (as if God is far off) and, on the other, individualistic self-understanding (as he argues against the privatization of bourgeois faith). As Ricoeur notes in his piece about the non-religious interpretation of Christianity in Bonhoeffer’s thought, the way to discover the this-worldly interpretation is to turn to God in human form as Jesus:

In this sense Nietzsche is right when he says: God is dead. All that remains for us then is the God of Jesus Christ. A theology is something that we can no longer do; but what we must do is Christology, and it is this Christology that can give us a theology.²⁷

Indeed, in a “world come of age,” the church must still bear witness to the incarnation, death, and resurrection, though we must find a new language in which to give it voice. Though this new language is necessary, as Bonhoeffer writes, the church refuses to deal with the “world come of age” and persists in self-preservation and fights for the persistence of the status quo while seeking a reclamation of a glorified past, evidenced by the turn to moralizing and the focus on individual sin. Bonhoeffer says of this: “I consider the attack by Christian apologetics on the world’s coming of age as, first of all, pointless, second, ignoble, and third, unchristian.”²⁸ The church’s refusal to deal with the world as it is in the face of a world where most people are no longer in need of nor resonant with the dominant metaphysical religion means that the church’s rhetoric and clinging to old language only connects with an increasingly small and vulnerable group of people. Of this, Bonhoeffer writes:

Are we supposed to fall all over precisely this dubious lot of people in our zeal or disappointment or woo and try to peddle our wares to them? Or should we jump on a

²⁷ Paul Ricoeur, “The Non-Religious Interpretation of Christianity in Bonhoeffer,” in *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought*, ed. Brian Gregor & Jens Zimmerman, 156-176 (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 159 and 163.

²⁸ Bonhoeffer, *LPP*, 427.

few unfortunates in their hour of weakness and commit, so to speak, religious rape?²⁹

In order to discover then a new language for Christian faith that can speak to today, he turns to his perennial question of “Who is Christ for us today?”³⁰ in this religionless age.³¹

What keeps gnawing at me is the question, what is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today? The age when people tell people with words—whether with theological or with pious words—is past, as is the age of inwardness and of conscience, and that means words— the age of religion altogether. We are approaching a completely religionless age; people now simply cannot be religious anymore.³²

This is what Bonhoeffer is referencing when he speaks of “the boundary” and “the center,” for when the world has come of age and is no longer in need of God, then it is uninterested in the metaphysical depictions of God. He thereby critiques the ways in which religion had functioned so that it was possible to obscure suffering by fashioning a God that allowed us to achieve power and transcendence. It is this religion and a liberal Protestant church which has so easily surrendered to and joined Hitler that Bonhoeffer combats, calling instead for a vision of God that is not intended to forestall our weakness but one where Christ is present in the center of suffering: for “redemption myths arise from the human experience of boundaries. But Christ takes hold of human beings in the midst of their lives.”³³

Bonhoeffer thus wrestles to articulate what the church or liturgy will look like under these new conditions. As he writes: “How do we talk about God—without religion, that is

²⁹ Ibid., 363.

³⁰ As I will detail in a subsequent section.

³¹ Bonhoeffer, *LPP*, 322.

³² Ibid., 362.

³³ Ibid., 448. He writes about this throughout *LPP*. See for instance: “Epistemological transcendence has nothing to do with God’s transcendence. God is the beyond in the midst of our lives. The church stands not at the point where human powers fail, at the boundaries, but in the center of the village.” (Ibid., 367).

without the temporally conditioned presuppositions of metaphysics of the inner life and so on?"³⁴

How is this to be the church in the world? He notes that the words we once used must become silenced:

What reconciliation and redemption mean, rebirth and Holy Spirit, love for one's enemies, cross and resurrection, what it means to live in Christ and follow Christ, all that is so difficult and remote that we hardly dare speak of it anymore. In these words and actions handed down to us, we sense something totally new and revolutionary, but we cannot yet grasp it and express it. This is our own fault. Our church has been fighting during these years only for its self-preservation, as if that were an end in itself. It has become incapable of bringing the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and to the world. So the words we used before must lose their power, be silenced, and we can be Christians today only in two ways, through prayer and in doing justice among human beings. All Christian thinking, talking, and organizing must be born anew, out of that prayer and action.³⁵

Bonhoeffer ties this wrestling of what it means to be Christian in a "world come of age" with the struggle in the early church surrounding circumcision: the early church did not know how to face a new world of inclusion, as the church of Bonhoeffer's day didn't know how to speak of God in an age that no longer desired metaphysical language for God.³⁶ Interestingly, Bonhoeffer also wearied of talking about God with religious people and notes that it is often something that he no longer knows how to do, whereas with non-religious people he finds that he can speak of God in new language. As he writes to his friend and colleague Bethke:

(A religious interpretation of Christianity) means, in my opinion, to speak metaphysically, on the one hand, and on the other, individualistically. Neither way is appropriate, either for the biblical message or for people today. Hasn't the individualistic question of saving our personal souls almost faded away for most of us? Isn't it our impression that there are really more important things than this question? I know it

³⁴ Ibid., 364.

³⁵ Ibid., 389.

³⁶ Ibid., 365. I preached about this exactly in my sermons on the book of Galatians in the summer of 2021. See: Sara Wilhelm Garbers, "What about Us?" sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, July 4, 2021: <https://sarawg.com>. Also available in Appendix F.

sounds outrageous to say that, but after all, isn't it fundamentally biblical? Does the question of saving one's soul even come up in the Old Testament? Isn't God's righteousness and kingdom on earth the center of everything? And isn't Rom. 3:24ff. the culmination of the view that God alone is righteous, rather than any individualistic doctrine of salvation? What matters is not the beyond but this world, how it is created and preserved, is given laws, reconciled, and renewed. What is beyond this world is meant, in the gospel, to be there FOR this world... in the biblical sense of the creation and the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus.³⁷

Bonhoeffer is clear that the church will only persist in so far as it becomes one that is constituted by prayer and the doing of justice. In other words, a church that finds a way to move in the world by employing and enacting new, liberating language and action must be the church of the future.

People will be alarmed and yet overcome by its power—the language of a new righteousness and truth, a language proclaiming that God makes peace with humankind and that God's kingdom is drawing near. ...Until then the Christian cause will be a quiet and hidden one, but there will be people who pray and do justice and wait for God's own time. May you be like one of them.³⁸

Affected by my own particular situation I, like Bonhoeffer, have been wrestling with what it means to speak of God in a world that has come of age. I struggle with this throughout my sermons, seeking to speak in a language that builds a bridge to people currently inside the church—those who are most familiar with metaphysical speaking of God—while also connecting with people who are no longer satisfied by the language and conceptions of God and humanity of most orthodox and particularly white and evangelical expressions of faith. Thus, I seek to develop a way of speaking and naming faith that connects with (in my language) the “real of our lives.” I do so by narrating my own story and struggles, incorporating psychology and social theory, and talking about political realities and inviting us to move into those spaces.

³⁷ Bonhoeffer, *LPP*, 372-73.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 390.

Admittedly, this is a continued work and struggle as I seek to rethink how to speak of Christian faith in view of this world and the suffering of people today.

Being Church in a World Come of Age: Powerlessness, Silence, Prayer, and Doing Justice

The second aspect of Bonhoeffer's conception of "religionless Christianity" in a "world come of age" that I want to highlight is his wrestling with how the church is to function in the world and how one might likewise be Christian in it. In a world come of age, the question Bonhoeffer faces is: is there any room left for God? For Bonhoeffer the answer is "Yes/and," in that the room for God is discovered as we live in the world as those who live without God. Here the gospel moves from a vision of a far-off coming kingdom to one rooted in this world, pressing the church to find words and ways of being in the world that is beset by violence and suffering. As noted above, for Bonhoeffer, the "becoming of flesh" of Christ becomes the shape and grounds for the possibility and promise of Christian thought and action in the world that has come of age.

This God of the world is a weak God—the God who is known in the suffering in the world and on the cross. For God saves us not through metaphysical evacuation of this world, but through incarnation via weakness of a God who has died:

And yet the Christian is surprised; he believes that this spells the end when he hears the words: God is dead....Because he has not dared to take on the fundamental insight—namely, that we know God only in his total weakness on the cross.... it exists only if it is preached and if it opens life, if it gives life.³⁹

This weakness calls us to stay with Christ and our neighbors *in this world* through the night in the garden:

Thus our coming of age leads us to a truer recognition of our situation before God. God

³⁹ Riceour, "The Non-Religious Interpretation," 163.

would have us know that we must live as those who manage their lives without God. The same God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15:34). The same God who makes us to live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God, and with God, we live without God. God consents to be pushed out of the world and onto the cross; God is weak and powerless in the world and in precisely this way and only so, is at our side and helps us. Matt. 8:17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us not by virtue of his omnipotence but rather by virtue of his weakness and suffering! This is the crucial distinction between Christianity and all religions. Human religiosity directs people in need to the power of God in the world, God as *deus ex machina*. The Bible directs people toward the powerlessness and the suffering of God; only the suffering God can help. To this extent, one may say that the previously described development toward the world's coming of age, which has cleared the way by eliminating a false notion of God, frees us to see the God of the Bible, who gains ground and power in the world by being powerless. This will probably be the starting point for our 'worldly interpretation.'⁴⁰

Here Christians stand by God in God's own pain and in the pain of the world. Jesus asks if we can stay awake in Gethsemane for to be human is to share in God's suffering.

Thus we must really live in that godless world and not try to cover up or transfigure its godlessness somehow with religion. For being Christians is not about being a particular type of religious person, but it is about instead what it means being human, not a certain type of human being, but the human being Christ creates in us. It is not a religious act that makes someone a Christian, but rather sharing in God's suffering in the worldly life. This is the *metanoia* of following the path that Jesus walks.⁴¹

This *metanoia* calls us to life in view of the reality of the world and to join with God in God's powerlessness and movement toward the reality of suffering. As Bonhoeffer notes:

Jesus calls not to a new religion but to a life. And what is this? This participation in God's powerlessness in the world. We cannot cover up this world, but rather we are called to uncover it and to surprise the world by letting light shine on it.⁴²

For religion is rooted in human activity "which seeks to reach the beyond, to postulate a divinity,

⁴⁰ Bonhoeffer, *LPP*, 479-80.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 480.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 482.

to invoke help and protection, in short: religion as self-justification.”⁴³ But life, the Christian life is discovered through solidarity and being-for-others in the working for justice.

The church is church only when it is there for others. As a first step it must give away all its property to those in need. The clergy must live solely on the freewill offerings of the congregations and perhaps be engage in some secular vocation. The church must participate in the worldly tasks of life in the community—not dominating but helping and serving. It must tell people in every calling what a life with Christ is, what it means "to be there for others." In particular, our church will have to confront the vices of hubris, the worship of power, envy, and illusionism as the roots of all evil. It will have to speak of moderation, authenticity, trust, faithfulness, steadfastness, patience, discipline, humility, modesty, contentment.⁴⁴

This move to the kingdom coming here on earth and the attention paid to the suffering and doing the work of justice permeates my work and preaching as I seek to help foster a community formation that will enable us to show up in the world and care for and with it. The theological significance of “religionless Christianity” is that this is a decidedly Christian theology, but one that now must work within the reality of a “world come of age.” This is a world where God cannot be assumed and faith is not found in metaphysical or in individualistic notions of salvation, but it is now found in God’s being at the center of human existence. Therefore, the old speech of God must cease. Christ must now be known through the theology of the cross where Christ has been shown to be weak and is present with the world in their suffering.⁴⁵ Christianity similarly must transform to be a faith of presence with others in the midst of their suffering, embodying a hope *in and for this world*. It is to this end that I engage with Bonhoeffer’s work centered around his two perennial questions: “Who is Christ?” and

⁴³ Bethge, *Biography*, 872.

⁴⁴ Bonhoeffer, *LPP*, 503.

⁴⁵ “Their” meaning the people of the earth’s suffering.

“Who is the Neighbor?” in order to answer what it means to be Christian and the Church in our time.

Being and Becoming Christian and the Church:

“Who is Christ?” and “Who is the Neighbor?”

In these next sections I trace more specifically the evolution of Bonhoeffer’s thought regarding what it means to be Christian and be Church (for him the first can only be discovered and realized through the second) in a “world come of age” in order to both name and note the particular ethical import of the theological shifts in his work and to likewise make clear the particular direction that my own theo-ethical work takes in contrast to many historic expressions of orthodox protestant ethical formation. In what follows then, I trace Bonhoeffer’s unfolding conceptions of Christology, obedience and discipleship in view of the neighbor, memory and critique, being-for-others, and costly grace as he seeks to answer what it means to be Christian in view of the questions: “Who is Christ?” and “Who is my neighbor?”

Who is Christ? Being and Becoming Christian in a World Come of Age

The question “Who is Christ?” is central throughout Bonhoeffer’s work. In his earliest writings, this is the central and first question for the Christian, though over time, the way Christ is discovered shifts to being known through answering the second question: “Who is my neighbor?” In what follows then, I trace his unfolding thoughts on theologies of the cross versus theologies of glory where Christology is discovered through vulnerability and suffering and the cross serves as a counter-logos and location for critique in a world come of age.

Christology: From the Humiliated One to the Ones Who Suffer

In seeking to answer the question of: “Who is Christ?” Bonhoeffer notes that the answer to this question is not readily apparent but is arcane and hidden. Its hiddenness, he writes, serves

to critique religion when it becomes too immanent and assumes it may fully apprehend both God and the neighbor.⁴⁶ The way that the hiddenness of God is made known is through the revelation of Christ through faith. As he writes: “The meaning of history is tied up with an event which takes place in the depth and hiddenness of a man who ended on the cross. The meaning of this is found in the humiliated Christ.”⁴⁷

This humiliated Christ is known through revelation, a revelation that must be embraced and followed, or else denied. In his early lectures on Christology, he argues that the present Christ, the “Christ pro-me,” is only known through preaching and the sacraments and is present in the church via the word, sacrament, and the congregation.⁴⁸ In *Sanctorum Communio* the priority of revelation is established, and faith is the act that responds to the revelation.⁴⁹ In *Act and Being*, the act of faith goes together with the being who is formed through revelation; still, faith is only possible through revelation.⁵⁰

The revealed Christ, the humiliated one makes clear that Christology must be a *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross) not *theologia gloriae* (theology of glory). The humiliated Christ represents an early departure in Bonhoeffer’s work from many other reformed visions of the

⁴⁶ See for instance: Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, 31.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁴⁸ Ch 10-11 of Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*. See pages 43 and 46.

⁴⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, vol. 1 *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Series* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), esp. 127.

⁵⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being: Transcendental Philosophy and Ontology in Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Series* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 117.

cross such as Barth's vision of glory where Christ is Lord who conquers all.⁵¹ Bonhoeffer critiques Barth on this point in *Act and Being* by bringing to light how the theology of glory leads to the idea that God is the pure act of revelation who does not depend upon history, so revelation becomes the act known only through faith, not through revelation in history. The theology of the cross, however, understands that being through revelation in history enlivens the act of faith.⁵²

This wedding of the theology of the cross rooted in a this-worldly revelation and faith rooted in the humiliated one is present throughout Bonhoeffer's work though it evolves over time. In *Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer notes that the only way of faith is through action because faith is action and the only options for responses to the revelation of Christ are action or inaction (or, said another way, the options are to say "yes" or "no" to the revelation of Christ on the cross).⁵³ As such, the cross it is a call to dying to the self to take up one's cross to follow Christ, first understood by Bonhoeffer as the call to obedience. By the time he writes *Ethics*, he is especially concerned that the cross refuse the dual issues he sees as the liberal church's syncretism or the conservative church's refusal of the world, turning to a Christology that embraces the full vision of revelation witnessed in Christ's incarnation, the cross, and resurrection. He notes:

A Christian ethic built only on the incarnation would easily lead to the compromise solution; an ethic built only on the crucifixion or only on the resurrection of Jesus Christ

⁵¹ See, for instance: John D. Godsey, "Barth and Bonhoeffer," 26-27. Interestingly, though reformed theology focused on original sin and total depravity of the person, it embraces a powerful theology of glory that the Christian accesses in the resurrected Christ. For Bonhoeffer, however, Christology must begin and be focused on the humiliation of Christ on the cross.

⁵² Bonhoeffer, *Act and Being*.

⁵³ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 182.

would fall into radicalism and enthusiasm. The conflict is resolved in their unity.⁵⁴

However, by the time of his *LPP*, for Bonhoeffer Christ is no longer present in the same ways. Instead, Christ is now present in the cross and in the suffering of the neighbor. It is thus through the suffering of God in Christ that the Christian is called to turn to the neighbor; answering “Who is Christ?” demands that we live responsibly in view of the neighbor. Here the cross is the call to silence and suffering with/on behalf of the neighbor who suffers. Thus, the Christology of Bonhoeffer is centered on a Christ who is hidden but then revealed in the humiliation of Christ on the cross and moves to being discovered in view of the ones who suffer. Likewise, the response demanded of the cross moves from obedience through word and sacrament and congregation to responsibility to the ones who suffer.

The move that Bonhoeffer makes in his Christology to the ones who suffer is in concert with subsequent works of both Black and Latin American liberation theologians such as James Cone’s work *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* where he argues that the cross cannot be understood without understanding the lynching tree or Jon Sobrino’s work on the crucified ones. Here the cross is not a static event, rather, it is discovered in the crucified peoples of our time.⁵⁵ This same move, a “this-worldly” Christology is important for my own work and ethics, opening up the life of faith to take more seriously our experiences in our skin and to take up responsibility

⁵⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, vol. 6, *The Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works Series*, ed. Victoria J. Barnett and Barbara Wojhoski (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009): 157.

⁵⁵ James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011). Cone writes, “In the mystery of God’s revelation, black Christians believed that just knowing that Jesus went through an experience of suffering in a manner similar to theirs gave them faith that God was with them, even in the suffering on lynching trees just as God was present with Jesus in suffering on the cross.” (21-22) Ignacio Ellacuría was the first one to coin the term “the crucified people.” See: Ignacio Ellacuría, “The Crucified People,” in *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría, eds. 257-278 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996). Also: Jon Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom: The Martyrs of El Salvador and the Crucified Peoples* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003).

for being Christian through solidarity with the ones who suffer. Thus, when we partake of communion, we do not just remember a historic account, but we remember and live the way of the cross so that we are then able to live a table fellowship that makes possible a world where all have bread to eat, safety, and welcome.

The Memory of the Cross: The Role of Critique and Christ as the Counter-Logos

Bonhoeffer's understanding of the memory of the cross and its animation of the response to the twin questions of "Who is Christ?" and "Who is my neighbor?" anticipates the post-war New Political Theology in recognition that the relationship of faith to society and of faith to Christian religion is a critical one. Faith functions as the critique of society that refuses to see persons as subjects and as that which would either privatize or syncretize the radical nature of the vision of the cross and God's in-breaking of God in Christ who is the counter-logos to the ways of power in the world.⁵⁶ It is through this in-breaking that the world is moved toward justice and the resurrection reality that is found and born witness to in Christ.⁵⁷

Though younger Bonhoeffer would change his exact understanding of the role of critique to faith, he has a keen awareness of its import as soon as 1933 when in "The Church and the Jewish Question" Bonhoeffer said that there are three responses Christians can have to the state: (1) to ask whether the actions are legitimate; (2) to aid the victims of state action—it has an obligation to the victims whether Christian or not; or (3) to put a spoke in the wheel itself.⁵⁸ The third option requires direct political action. The church must always be in a state of critique; this

⁵⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, 33.

⁵⁷ For more see: Congdon, "Bonhoeffer and Bultmann," esp. 192-195.

⁵⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Sword: Letters, Lectures, and Notes, 1929-1936*, ed. Edwin H. Robertson (Evanston, IL: Harper & Row, 1965), 155.

is its posture. Faith is the critique of both the individualization and the syncretism of Christian religion, and political theology is the critique that comes against bourgeois subjectivity that would try to prevent all persons from becoming subjects.⁵⁹

Faith is also that which critiques the theology of the church which assumes the centrality of metaphysical religious constructions. Critique is not only focused on the outer world, but is also turned toward the church itself, opening to the work of God in the world. It is an address that calls to the Christian, demanding that theology must always be done in connection with the actual historical situation. This is, as Bonhoeffer noted, the way that ethical conflict is avoided, for faith it is not about abstraction but about following God in history.

What the Christian is called to then is a position of critique—critique that moved from the expectation of moral perfectionism on the part of the church and the as is the case in *Discipleship*, to living the ethical life in the world through Christ who allows for the in-breaking of the kingdom in such a way that Christians must live out a Christo-centric ethic in the here and now of work, marriage, and government in *Ethics*. Indeed, by the time he gets to *Ethics* and then even more so in his letters collected in *LPP*, he critiques the kind of romanticism of his youth that had not known yet the historical situation in which he was living. The call of Christ to action and critique is as a part of the historical consciousness of the church that the church must embrace. Of this he writes:

The church can only defend its own space by fighting, not for space, but for the salvation of the world. Otherwise, the church becomes a ‘religious society’ that fights in its own

⁵⁹ It ought to be noted here that part of Sölle’s turn to liberation theology from political theology is that it focuses too much on the subjectivity of the oppressed people group and our job to take the suffering down from their crosses. For similar reasons I turn not toward the suffering ones, but start with the suffering within one’s self so as to avoid this paternalistic and colonial reach to fix or save others. For more on Sölle’s move to liberation theology see the chapter “Hunger after Liberation,” in Dorothee Sölle, *Against the Wind: Memoir of a Radical Christian*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 98-105.

interest and thus has ceased to be the church of God in the world.⁶⁰

Thus, Bonhoeffer's Christology is deeply embedded in the actual historic context where the cross and incarnation are remembered as they critique anything that crucifies or causes suffering of the neighbor in our time. The cross here is not history but that which has ongoing relevance, serving as the ethical grounding for Christian faith and the understanding that to be Christian and to be the church in our time demands likewise of us: that we look to the suffering in our historical context and remember the cross as we then engage in direct action and solidarity with the neighbor.

The role of the cross as counter-logos and critique pervades my development of a feminist political theological ethics of formation: central to it is a belief that to be Christian is rooted in our bodies, in this life, and in this time. As I note, my work is about fostering formation such that we might be and become Christian in the face of American Christian Nationalism. No longer is there space for Christianity to aid one in flight from the real of our world and our lives, but it must, indeed, take up responsibility to ask what it means to be Christian here and now, what it means to be people of love and life and freedom. I will expound on this more in later chapters, but for now, suffice it to say that the memory of the cross as that which critiques all forces of oppression and suffering in our world is necessary if Christianity is to speak in a "world that has come of age."

Who is the Neighbor? Being and Becoming Christian in a World Come of Age

So, to the second question: "Who is the neighbor?" and "What does the neighbor demand

⁶⁰ Bonhoeffer, *LPP*, 64.

of the self or the church in order to be/become Christian?”⁶¹ These questions are not mere theological queries, but ethical demands on the Christian’s life. Bonhoeffer explores these demands throughout his work, though his answers to the questions evolve over time. In this section I explore his work on the neighbor and the demand of the Christian to be-for-others in view of the neighbor who suffers.

The Neighbor: Living Responsibly in View of the Ones Who Suffer

The neighbor figures throughout Bonhoeffer’s work and he notes that there is a particular demand that the neighbor asks, shifting the question from “Who is the neighbor?” to “What must I do in order to *be* a neighbor?” As he wrote in *Discipleship*:

Being a neighbor is not a qualification of someone else; it is their claim on me, nothing else. At the same moment in every situation I am the one required to act, to be obedient. There is literally no time left to ask about someone else’s qualification. I must act and I must obey; I must be a neighbor to the other person.⁶²

In *Discipleship* the way to be a neighbor is discovered in following of Christ’s call, being responsible for the neighbor as their burden-bearer.⁶³ In *Ethics*, responsibility calls believers to be conformed to Christ.⁶⁴ Here, Christ as the new human offers a way for all to become human,⁶⁵ and the Christian is called to “vicarious representative action” on behalf of the neighbor.⁶⁶ In his

⁶¹ See: Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, 39. For Bonhoeffer the church is called to be Christ in the world through its deeds; this is the apology of praxis. More than the deed itself though it is the way that the deed is formed through the turning to Christ and then is realized in the turn to the neighbor, which becomes the apology in the world.

⁶² Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 76.

⁶³ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 88.

⁶⁴ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 47.

⁶⁵ However, it is concerning that in *Ethics* Bonhoeffer continues to think that only those taking on Christ are real human beings. *Ibid.*, 134.

⁶⁶ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 232.

Letters then, the ethical demand of the neighbor is known through Jesus who becomes human for others where the presence of God is made visible in the weakness and suffering of the cross,⁶⁷ and the Christian's work becomes staying with Christ in the Garden, refusing to go to sleep in view of the suffering, moving toward solidarity with the suffering ones through prayer and the doing of justice.

As such, it is through sharing in the suffering of others that we are brought into contact with the God before whom all can become subjects. This turn disallows privatized religion, and it critiques the bourgeois notion of the self which allows the self to exist outside of any call to responsibly love the neighbor; instead, the Christian is called to be a responsible self through solidarity and the doing of justice. As Bonhoeffer writes:

We are not lords but instruments in the hands of the Lord of history; we can truly share only in a limited measure in the suffering of others. We are not Christ, but if we want to be Christians it means that we are to take part in Christ's greatness of heart, in the responsible action that in freedom lays hold of the hour and faces the danger, and in the true sympathy that springs forth not from fear but from Christ's freeing and redeeming love for all who suffer. Inactive waiting and dully looking on are not Christian responses. Christians are called to action and sympathy not through their own firsthand experiences but by the immediate experience of their brothers, for whose sake Christ suffered.⁶⁸

Already in *Ethics*, Bonhoeffer anticipates a form of discipleship that is wrought through suffering: "Jesus Christ is not the transfiguration of noble humanity but the Yes of God to real human beings, not the dispassionate Yes of a judge but (the) merciful Yes of a compassionate sufferer."⁶⁹ Then, while in prison, the suffering moves from a theoretical "neighbor" to one embodied in history as Bonhoeffer began to ask if in days past they (he and his contemporaries)

⁶⁷ Stephen Plant, *Bonhoeffer, Outstanding Christian Thinkers* (London: Continuum, 2004), 146.

⁶⁸ Bonhoeffer, *LPP*, 49.

⁶⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 85.

perhaps made too much of their own suffering.⁷⁰ The longer Bonhoeffer was in prison, the more he noticed that he had become less sensitive to hardships. He wonders about this, noting that perhaps this is as a defense mechanism, though he is more inclined to interpret this as his deepened sense of responsibility and genuine love for the neighbor. He writes:

As long as our imagination is aroused and whipped up, loving our neighbor remains something vague and generalized. Today I can take a calmer view of people and their predicaments and needs, so I'm better able to help them out.⁷¹

In prison he comes to understand that even his sense of the human and of morality have shifted. In contemplating his transformation from a self who follows Christ in "simple obedience" to one discovered through the encounter with suffering, he writes, "We must regard human beings less in terms of what they do and neglect to do and more in terms of what they suffer."⁷²

In this way, Bonhoeffer's experience of the suffering around him ruptures his theology as it becomes a theology that places suffering at the center of theological understanding. Bethge notes this difference in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* and *LPP*, writing that in *Ethics* Bonhoeffer believes ethics is how the Christian lives before God. However, by the time he gets to *LPP*, Bonhoeffer notes that in this world we must live before God as if we were living without God.⁷³ This is the theology of suffering which knows what it is to be forsaken by God. Through Christ, the Church is with and for the world in its suffering as it recalls the memory of the cross that brings new life. This is the new life for which we fight, a space where all persons may be able to stand before the

⁷⁰ Bonhoeffer, *LPP*, 323.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 358-9.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 45.

⁷³ Bethge, *Biography*, 859.

God who calls them to be subjects. It is, as Metz wrote:

Only if Christianity can join the birth of a global society can it show the value in and for that society of its understanding of a solidarity that is free of hatred and violence. Yet loving one's enemy and resisting hatred and violence do not dispense Christianity from the struggle for all persons to be subjects. Otherwise it will fall short of its mission: to be a place where hope is at home, that hope in the God of the living and the dead, who calls all men and women to be subjects in God's presence.⁷⁴

Here Christians are encountered and formed anew by the suffering and powerless Christ who is the “defining, liberating, and creative center of the world.”⁷⁵

Thus, the neighbor is now the one who suffers. As Jesus pointed out in his engagement with the lawyer in Luke’s Gospel, there are no boundaries or limits to who is the neighbor, rather to be Christian is to love the neighbor and to live responsibly in view of their experiences, making possible their flourishing and life.⁷⁶ Thus, the movement in Bonhoeffer’s thought from *responsibility for* to *solidarity with* is important. It opens up for the Christian today an ethical responsibility that seeks to honor the neighbor not as a concept but as one who is encountered in history and in their experience of suffering. This call to solidarity is pervasive throughout my work and is central to my formulation of the moral demand of being and becoming Christian in the face of American Christian Nationalism.

Being-for-Others: Costly Grace in a World Come of Age

To live in view of the neighbor who suffers demands, as was noted earlier, “being-for-

⁷⁴ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 214.

⁷⁵ Bethge, *Biography*, 865.

⁷⁶ See: Luke 10:25-37 is a deeply political passage in which a lawyer follows up the command by Jesus to “love your neighbor as yourself” with the question: “And who is my neighbor?” In Jesus’ response, he tells the story of a Samaritan embodying concern for one who is abused and abandoned along the road, actions of a neighbor...both making clear that to be a neighbor is to respond *and* to do so in such a way that refuses the political machinations that would dehumanize a particular group of people.

others.” This is the costly grace that is demanded in a world come of age. Bethge reminds that to take up Bonhoeffer’s “religionless Christianity” in view of the neighbor is to commit to the primacy of praxis from us today as we live being-for-others in our time:

I am afraid that any exploration in Bonhoeffer’s footsteps will not be successfully achieved with books alone. Knowledge will only come through taking risks and through involvement... With Bonhoeffer, actions and life comment on his sayings, and the words on his actions, in an extraordinary degree. Maybe his concept will never come cheaper.⁷⁷

This is, as Metz says, the “price of orthodoxy”⁷⁸ or (in Bonhoeffer’s language) the “cost of discipleship.”⁷⁹ The theologian is the one who speaks for the people and the symbols of this theology ought to be those which bring into being the world the kind of vision that Christ proclaimed, a “religionless Christianity,” that is a practical and political theology where all are remembered and brought to new life in the radical action of Christ in solidarity with the ones who suffer.

This is the theology that Bonhoeffer anticipated and Bethge employed in places such as apartheid South Africa. While Bethge did not make it explicit, he found that by sharing Bonhoeffer’s notion of “religionless Christianity” with those resisting apartheid, Bonhoeffer became an inspiration for resistance.⁸⁰ This is because although the New Political Theology was not birthed until after his death, Bonhoeffer nurtured it in the womb of the Tegel prison where he wondered how theology might speak of suffering in the world in such a way that the memory of

⁷⁷ Eberhard Bethge, “The Challenge of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Life and Theology,” in *World Come of Age: A Symposium on Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. R.G. Smith (London; Collins, 1967), 67.

⁷⁸ Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 130-136.

⁷⁹ Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*.

⁸⁰ Peter Barrett, “The Quest for Ubuntu in a Coming-of-Age South Africa—Questions Arising from Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Latter Ideas,” *Religion & Theology* 15, no. 1 (2008): 8-27.

the cross might enliven the “dangerous memories” of those who have suffered. By moving into solidarity with Christ in the midst of suffering, the church is able to critique ideology and to emerge as that which, as it later came to be known, is a political theology that fights for a world in which all persons become subjects before God by doing justice and by staying awake with Christ in the Garden to give witness to the weakness of a God who conquers death and thereby swallows up the power of death in its victory.

Thus, through the development of an account of God that speaks of suffering and understands the position of faith to society as one of critique, and through building a notion of the theological turn to the responsible self, Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s “religionless Christianity” anticipates the role that political theology ought to have in positioning Christianity in the world after Auschwitz. Through his wrestling with what it means to be the church in a world come of age, turning to a deep exploration of a Christology rooted in vulnerability and suffering, he fosters space for both critique and resistance of the political machinations that make the conditions that cause human suffering. Bonhoeffer offers us a vision for formation of individuals and a church that lives in view of the question of “Who is Christ?” in view of answering “Who is our neighbor?”, fundamentally making clear that to be and become Christian and the Church demands showing up in the world to be-for-others, doing the work of justice, and embodying a costly grace in a “world that has come of age.” Thus, Bonhoeffer is an important resource for the task of theological ethics and Christian formation in a “world that has come of age” that the church might be and become Christian in the face of American Christian Nationalism.

Implications for a Feminist Political Theological Ethics of Formation

As I have noted, there are several implications of Bonhoeffer’s work on my own development of a feminist political theological ethics of formation. The first of these is a belief

that there is content to being and becoming Christian and it demands something of us: it asks that we become formed in a particular way. For Bonhoeffer, the content of this formational end is discovered through both seeking understanding of “Who is Christ?” and “Who is the neighbor?” In my work I turn to these questions, adding to them the question of “Who is the self?” in belief that self-formation is a necessary component in seeking to be and become Christian.⁸¹

A second point of resonance between my work and Bonhoeffer’s is my wrestling with what it means to be Christian and the church in a “world that has come of age.” This effort is explicit throughout my work and animates the central tension that I am seeking to tend to in my preaching—that of inviting the part of the community who persists in metaphysical faith justifications and most committed to American Christian Nationalism into new ways of imaging the call to be Christian, while seeking to aid others in the community and beyond to discover pathways to remain and/or become Christian when they are awakened to the world come of age. In this way, I also seek to foster the imagination in the community that political presence and action is central to what it means to be Christian in our time.

Third, I share Bonhoeffer’s sense that faith demands new language with which to speak. Thus, I turn to the Bible in order to bring its story forward so that it might shape us today, while seeking to find language and points of resonance and connection with our lives today by incorporating music, poetry, current events, psychology, and sociology. In this way I open up a language of faith for a “world that has come of age.”

My work aims to articulate a vision of Christianity where Christ takes hold of us in the

⁸¹ I employ this language as it is that of the greatest commandment: to love God and to love the neighbor as we love ourselves. Bonhoeffer only addresses his questions of moral formation to the first two locations. I will explore this and how it appears in my work more in-depth in the third part of the dissertation (particularly in chapter six).

center of our lives, inviting us to turn to our own suffering and that of the world. In this way, my work also critiques the privatized notions of salvation which are so pervasive inside of white American evangelicalism. Thus I invite the community into a way of becoming human that allies us even more deeply with ourselves and the suffering we know in our own stories—suffering such as the abuse we have endured, the ruptured attachment we have developed, and our daily struggles—as we then also move toward the suffering in our world: the places where racism, sexism, homophobia, classism and all forms of injustice persist and make life and living impossible. All while asking: what does it mean for us to be and become Christian in a world where black people literally cannot breathe, where women are denied basic health care and bodily rights, where children are separated from their parents at the border, and where transgender persons must fear for their lives? By pressing into the center of our lives and turning to our own wounds and the suffering and injustice in our world, my hope is that we might become Christian and the church.

This, like for Bonhoeffer, is a faith that does not rescue people through bolsters to the ego, but is discovered through the journey of decent and movement into the logos of Christ who is embodied in vulnerability and is crucified by the death-dealing forces of this world. In Bonhoeffer I also have a model for challenging myself to persevere in my work in an admittedly less vulnerable and liminal space than he faced. Though this study references my work as a minister in the midst of a resurgent rise of white Christian Nationalism, the uprisings against racism in the wake of murder of George Floyd, and our attempts to change our church's name and the following backlash from some church members, my actual person and well-being is and has not been under dire threat. Thus, Bonhoeffer challenges me to not only invite people to become responsible selves, but his work continues to influence my taking responsibility as a

minister in my community and as a person who was raised as a white evangelical in the suburban landscape of Minnesota that I might likewise be and become Christian in my time.

CHAPTER FOUR
DOROTHEE SÖLLE AND THE MYSTICAL POETICISM
NECESSARY FOR LIBERATION

I can't promise you for sure
I have nothing definite to go on
sectarian illusions fill me with sadness
and I recall the faith of my fathers with scorn

Who will come again I would ask
cock robin or humpty dumpty
the singsong of children waking early
The buckets in the abortionist's office

No smile has ever returned
no angel come twice
no peace will come again

If he comes again
I can't promise you for sure
but I promise him to you
I with nothing to go on
you without exception
He without proof
on his return

—Dorothee Sölle, “When he comes again”¹

While there are many ways Bonhoeffer is a central conversation partner in my reach to conceptualize and embody a political theo-ethical vision of formation for “a world come of age,” it is through Dorothee Sölle’s articulation of and commitment to mysticism that I find support for my move from an ethics of discipleship (as articulated especially by Bonhoeffer prior

¹ Dorothee Sölle, “When he comes again,” in *Revolutionary Patience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977), 3.

to his imprisonment), which is rooted in more in intellectual ascent and “simple obedience,” to an ethics of formation that asks one to engage in a journey of descent, opening oneself to love, to the cries of suffering within oneself and the world, and to the work and movement toward justice.² This is vital if one is to resist, as Sölle names it, the machinations of the “death machine” and “Christofacism.”³

The majority of Bonhoeffer’s work was written at a time when the rupture rendered by the Shoah was not yet clear. Sölle, however, writes in the shadow of the Shoah and wrestles with the legacy of both this rupture and the ongoing operation of what she names “Christofacism” in the church and world in view of the “Death Machine,” as evident in cold-war era nuclear armament and struggles through the 1980s. As such, Sölle animates an expansive vision of a political theology that is accountable to and rooted in suffering and a hermeneutic of liberation and praxis. This turn is a vital corrective to faith that has historically understood sin on the individual level and, as is true of American Christian Nationalism, refuses to take up any responsibility for the realities of social injustice, racism, and systemic sin. Here the Bible and Christian faith either remain complicit or, through embrace of a “hermeneutic of hunger,” can provide a critical alternative for how to be Christian in our time.

Another reason for my turn to Sölle’s work is the ways in which poetry functions in of her political theology and political liturgy of the *Politisches Nachtgebet* (Political Prayers at Night) gatherings.⁴ As evidenced in my first two sermons I preached at Colonial Church, my

² I will discuss in the next chapter.

³ I will detail these concepts later in the chapter.

⁴ In reading about the role of prayer and poetry in her work, I have been surprised by how few articles include the poems and instead just talk about them when there is something important about the poem itself which is part of her

preaching and theo-ethical imagination are formed by music and poetry.⁵ Reading Sölle's work has validated of my own sensibilities, which transgress the normatively accepted scholastic-infused theological and left-brained writings and sermons inside of much of theology and ethics.⁶ Not only this, but I think there is something of formational import to the experience of poetry and music and what it opens up in the hearer in terms of embodying a critical political ethics.⁷ Said alternatively, I believe that poetry and music are necessary languages for animating faith in "a world come of age." Sölle has been an important conversation partner as I have dreamed and launched a new service at the church in which we likewise strive to incorporate poetry and political liturgies.

Finally, I turn to Sölle because of the particularly feminist approach of her work. Though she was not self-consciously a feminist earlier in her life, she became one in her work and believed in the necessity of feminism as a part of the liberative vision of the gospel. This, combined with her being embodied as a woman, is resonant with my own work. I am quite aware that a part of my own formational work is mediated through my body and presence as a feminist minister. As I noted in the first sermon I preached at Colonial Church, I am aware that I am

sense about how the mystical can open us beyond the usual forms of thinking and understanding. See, for instance: Nancy Hawkins, "Dorothee Sölle: Radical Christian, Mystic in our Midst," *The Way* 44, no. 3 (2005): 85-96.

⁵ Even as I write this introductory section, I am listening to Taylor Swift and have a book of Mary Oliver poetry sitting next to me. I noted this on Twitter: Sara Wilhelm Garbers, "Writing/editing my #dissertation chapters on #Bonhoeffer and #Sölle's influence on my feminist political theology while listening to @taylorswift13 #Folklore and #evermorealbum is 100% on brand for me." May 7, 2021, 3:55 p.m., <https://twitter.com/sarawilhelmgarb/status/1390772353089552390?s=21>.

⁶ This is resonant with Sölle's own call for a "different language." In fact, she names her work not as a reach for theology but "theo-poetry," that opens us up to the "mythic-narrative" as we embrace the vulnerability of our experiences. See the chapter "A Different Language: Poetry and Prayer," (169-230) in Dianne L. Oliver's book *Dorothee Soelle: Essential Writings*. Dianne L. Oliver, *Dorothee Soelle: Essential Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 170.

⁷ As outlined previously, here I follow the work of Haker in *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*.

working in a congregational church, a tradition with a history of burning “witches” and denouncing and refusing strong women.

In what follows then, I examine the various elements of Sölle’s work as they impact my development of a feminist political theological ethics of formation. I begin by situating her work and central vision. In the subsequent sections I explore her articulation of political theology as that which opens one to engage in a three-part dance of: (1) attention through a “hermeneutics of hunger” where political theology is the search for both a hermeneutics and praxis of liberation in view of the social context and the ones who suffer; (2) outcry through the political liturgies and theo-poetry; and (3) action rooted in mysticism, solidarity, and love that resists Christofacism and the machinations of “Death Machine.”⁸ Finally, I end with implications for a feminist political theological ethics of formation.

Situating Sölle

Oh when
will the graves finally be empty
the exhuming of victims unnecessary
the pictures gone
of children sprayed with a new poison
that turns the skin black and peeling
and makes the eyes sink into their sockets
oh when
will the graves finally be empty
of mutilated bodies
in el salvador

When I first became a christian
I wanted to see christ

⁸ I am grateful to my colleague for her work on Dorothee Sölle, which has shaped my turn to Sölle and opened me to this movement in Sölle’s work. Matteson has a wonderful three-fold summary that I follow here in turning to the way that attention, outcry, and action function in Sölle. See: Dannis Matteson, “The Theopoet(h)ics of Dorothee Sölle,” Paper presentation given at Society of Christian Ethics, Portland, OR, January 2018. Here Matteson follows this movement that Sölle first detailed in *Suffering*, correlated to the phases related to suffering. See, Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1975), 73.

striking me down on the road to damascus
 I pictured the place something like göttingen
 the empty tomb was no more than a fairy tale
 for the unenlightened

Now I've been becoming a christian
 for a long time
 and I have occasionally seen jesus
 the last time was an old woman in nicaragua
 who was learning to read she was beaming
 not just her eyes but also her hair thinned by age
 and her twisted feet
 she was beaming all over

But I've also grown poorer
 depressed I scurry through the city
 I even go to demonstrations
 half expecting courage to be passed out there
 and I'd give anything to see
 the other half of the story
 the empty tomb on easter morning
 and empty graves in el Salvador

—Dorothee Sölle, “Saturday before easter ‘81”⁹

Early Biography

Dorothee Sölle was a German mystical political theologian, committed to the transformation of the inner life in concert with external political realities. Sölle was born in 1929, the same year as Anne Frank.¹⁰ Raised in a middle-class family in Cologne, Germany, her family eschewed Nazi ideology. However, the formation of her identity was decidedly apolitical and bourgeois and she was taught to keep any anti-Nazi opinions to herself in public. In describing her childhood, Sölle notes the moment of realizing her cowardice at witnessing police

⁹ Dorothee Sölle, “Saturday before easter ‘81,” in *Of War and Love*, trans. Rita and Robert Kimber (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 101.

¹⁰ From “*Waking Up*,” in Sölle, *Against the Wind*, 14-17. Sölle notes the importance of Frank in her own political and religious wakening when she read *The Diary of Anne Frank* at the age of 20, five years after Anne was killed.

pursue a girl with a yellow star on a streetcar. She recalls being aware of the existence of the concentration camps in the late 1930s, even though she was not aware of their true horror until after the war. Sölle's childhood in Cologne was interrupted by the war as her house was destroyed in a firebombing. Though her family was short on food and needed to forage in the countryside, after the war life returned to normal relatively quickly.

It was through reading Anne Frank's diary while living in post-war Germany that Sölle began to wrestle with guilt.¹¹ At this time, she turned to existentialism and began to read Martin Heidegger and Jean Paul Sartre, entering a period of personal nihilism. At university she studied philosophy, including the works of Blaise Pascal and Simone Weil, but it was eventually her reading of Søren Kierkegaard that captured and engaged her religious imagination. Then, though studying Rudolf Bultmann and Friedrich Gogarten, she found her way into Christian faith anew because their work did not require her to leave behind the Enlightenment in order to embrace faith. From this time onward she began her personal theological and spiritual journey in earnest.

Though Sölle's existential impulses were nurtured by reading Kierkegaard and Bultmann, she spent the two decades after the war trying to come to terms with the Holocaust and came to believe that existential Christianity focused too much on the individual. The most obvious and fundamental disruption to the bourgeois theology and apolitical philosophy of Sölle's youth was her encounter with the realities of Auschwitz and what it meant to be German and Christian in view of this horror.¹² Her concern about existential Christianity was reinforced by Sölle's

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² This is explored in-depth in her *Political Theology*. In the original German edition, the subtitle to the book was: *A Conversation with Rudolf Bultmann*. The book systematically re-interprets Bultmann's work from the standpoint of the framework of the political theology that she shared with Metz and Moltmann. See: Dorothee Sölle, *Political Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1974).

correspondence with Bultmann after the publication of her book *Political Theology*. In his letters to Sölle, Bultmann insisted that social structures are unrelated to sin, for sin is about the individual offense against another.¹³ His dichotomy between sin and guilt fell flat and made clear to her why she needed to move toward political theology.¹⁴

In the years following the war, Sölle was astounded by how little the horror of the war, and especially the Shoah, disrupted her colleagues and neighbors. German Christian bourgeois habits and values in the 1950s looked frighteningly like the German Christian bourgeois habits and values before the war,¹⁵ habits which Sölle thought had made possible Hitler's rise to power.¹⁶ Thus she sought to develop a consciously "After Auschwitz" theology in the mid-1960s, for "I did not want to write one sentence in which the awareness that greatest catastrophe my people was not made explicit."¹⁷

Indeed, Sölle came to understand that theology could not be done in the abstract, focused on the afterlife or on somewhere other than where human beings live. Instead, a political theology must seek to work out the meaning of gospel truth within the social and political arenas.¹⁸ As she writes in *Political Theology*: "(A)ny theology that understands itself apolitically

¹³ Sölle, *Against the Wind*, 30.

¹⁴ She writes about Rudolf Bultmann in *Ibid.*, 28-30.

¹⁵ In *Creative Disobedience*, Sölle shows how German obedience to the will of the Nazis led to the destruction of six million Jews. And the responsibility for this obedience on the part of the people is connected to the church's formation of obedient followers. Thus, people can claim the name Christian and participate in the oppression of others. In fact, she blames the church for how it has oppressed people including showing the misery and powerlessness inflicted upon women at the hands of Christian theology that demands the submission and second-class designation of women. See: Dorothee Sölle, *Creative Disobedience* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1995).

¹⁶ To her, Christian theology needed to be questioned for how it forms people so that they internalize powerlessness and apathy, formation which ended up making German Christians complicit and at many points active participants in the Shoah.

¹⁷ *Against the Wind*, "Waking Up," 16.

¹⁸ Dorothee Sölle, "The Role of Political Theology in Relation to the Liberation of Men," in *Religion and the*

will attempt to portray the gospel independently of this horizon of social transformations, which for us is indispensable.”¹⁹ It is in response to this gospel, the one that bore witness to the possibility of social transformations, that Sölle gave her life.²⁰

From Political Theology to Liberation: Political Liturgy and Struggles for Justice

A central component of Sölle’s theological writing grew out of her involvement in *Politisches Nachtgebet* (Political Prayers at Night, 1968-1972). Started in 1968, *Politisches Nachtgebet* was an ecumenical gathering of Christians “who understood more and more plainly that theological reflection without political consequences was tantamount to blasphemy.”²¹ The very first *Politisches Nachtgebet* attracted more than a thousand participants; they proceeded monthly through 1972.

Their services were built upon the conviction that every robust theology has political implications, and each meeting was marked by information, meditation, and action that connected evening prayer, Bible readings, and religious reflections in conversation with political issues of the day. This merging of theology and political activism in the midst of Christian community and worship deeply impacted Sölle.

Thus, co-mingled with this embodied praxis in community with others, it was in the late 1960s that Sölle began to publish her theological reflections for a public audience, mixing

Humanizing of Man, edited by James M. Robinson (Waterloo, Ontario: Council on the Study of Religion, 1972), 132.

¹⁹ *Political Theology*, 62.

²⁰ Sölle was a Lutheran and remained a member of the Lutheran Church throughout her life. In 1954 she married Dietrich Sölle and together they had three children. They divorced in 1964 and she was a single parent until she remarried former Benedictine priest Fulbert Steffensky in 1969. Her identity as a mother and its importance to her as a part of her work in the world, though it was part of what limited her in the German academy. See Dorothee Sölle: *Against the Wind*, “Talk the Sky” (65-72) and “The Pain of Birth” (73-79).

²¹ Sölle, *Against the Wind*, 38. In German, these were called *Politisches Nachtgebet*, translation: “political night prayers.”

political, mystical, poetic, and theological reflections. Sölle's first major works were *Political Theology* (1974) and then *Suffering* (1975).²² Sölle believed in, understood, and lived praxis. In addition, she sought ways to integrate the work of Latin American liberation theologians with European political theology.²³

In the mid-1970s, Sölle began to move from designating her theological reflections as political theology to Liberation Theology. She did so for several reasons, the central one being a belief that Liberation Theology's hermeneutic and move from orthodoxy to orthopraxis was correct: theological reflection must be reflection upon praxis and liberation. This then became the basic characteristic of all of her subsequent writing. Sölle credited her turn toward Liberation Theology with moving her beyond political theology into a much richer understanding of the suffering of the poor and the message of Jesus in view of social realities.

There is much resonance between Sölle's work and Latin American Liberation Theology. Similar to liberation theologians, she was influenced by Marxist social analysis, though she never accepted Marx's views on religion. She was, however, committed to a socio-economic analysis as an aspect of the theological hermeneutical task that uncovered injustice and contradictions in contemporary economies and identified the agents of change to develop economic alternatives.²⁴

²² Sölle, *Suffering*.

²³ As seen in her *Stations of the Cross: A Latin American Pilgrimage* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

²⁴ In 1978, she set forth her views on democratic socialism in *Beyond Mere Dialogue: On Being Christian and Socialist*. In this work, Sölle addresses sin and alienation, cross and class struggle, and resurrection and liberation. Dorothee Sölle, *Beyond Mere Dialogue: On Being Christian and Socialist* (American Christians Toward Socialism, 1978).

Later Sölle: Mystic, Activist, Feminist, Eco-Theologian, Cultural Analyst, and Liberationist

Despite the prominence she gained in academia, Sölle never was offered a professorship in Germany. It was only in 1975 that she finally received a professorship at Union Theological Seminary, due in large part to the advocacy of Beverly Wildung Harrison.²⁵ For the next twelve years she moved between her home in Hamburg and New York City. It was at Union that Sölle was exposed more directly to feminist theology.

Sölle refused dichotomies and did not think that political theology ended with reflection upon Auschwitz as one particular historical moment but as a representative moment that demanded analysis of the various horrors that destroy the conditions for human life and liberation. Sölle saw connections between gender inequality and environmental destruction as being part of the same ideological refusal to see the truth.²⁶ Thus, as Sölle developed her political theology as a consciously liberative theology, she focused her efforts on critiquing various forms of praxis that reinforced the subjugation of women, ensconced militarism, and contributed to ecological degradation. Her reflection upon these practices in the light of the Gospel led her to become a feminist,²⁷ a pacifist, and an eco-theologian, all with the aim of liberation in the forms of justice, peace, and the valuing of creation.

²⁵ See: "Half the Sky" in *Against the Wind*, 65-72.

²⁶ In *To Work and To Love: A Theology of Creation* (written with Shirley Cloyes in 1984), Sölle said that the book emerged "out of my own struggle to agree with God and to learn to praise creation." The book was "an attempt to affirm our being created and becoming creators, being liberated and becoming agents of liberation, being loved and becoming lovers." Dorothee Sölle and Shirley A. Cloyes, *To Work and to Love: A Theology of Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984). In 1984 she also wrote *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Christian Feminist Identity*, in which she brought together issues of religion and life, politics and personal identity, feminism and Liberation Theology. She consistently noted that it is the same dehumanizing elements that combine to oppress both men and women. Dorothee Sölle, *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Christian Feminist Identity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984).

²⁷ See, for instance, her piece "Half the Sky" in *Against the Wind*, 65-72.

Fundamentally, Dorothee Sölle was a mystical political theologian, focused both on inner transformation and praxis aimed toward social and spiritual liberation for all. As she noted in *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*: “My questioning is focused on social reality. This means that for the sake of what is within, I seek to erase the distinction between a mystical internal and a political external.”²⁸ In what follows, I explore her theological contributions to the project of New Political Theology, noting the diversity and evolution in her thinking as she continued to write until her death, influenced by the horrors of the Vietnam War, the arms race, war in Central America, and the violence of consumerist culture.²⁹

Political Theology in View of Suffering: Attention, Outcry, and Action

Every time I hear the hand of liberation
 I think of the schoolchildren
 who one day will sing—
 in their own language—
 God protect Africa
 And sometimes I think— don’t laugh at me—
 it will be in my own lifetime
 I shall be able to sing along
 not only from the heavens
 but with all the Seraphim and Cherubim here
 In Hamburg—Altona I shall sing
 perhaps my voice will be very thin
 but sing with you I shall
 Three days long we shall hold the feast
 and Robben Island shall be island
 Soweto a young city
 And God shall protect Africa
 and I shall sing
 one way or another.

²⁸ “Introduction” to Dorothee Sölle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

²⁹ In the two books she wrote in 1983 and 1984 Sölle recognized and named the folly of endless military spending and the corresponding depletion of funding for the poor. See: Dorothee Sölle, *The Arms Race Kills Even Without War* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1983) and *Of War and Love*, Translated by Rita and Robert Kimber (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983); and *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Christian Feminist Identity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

In the book *Suffering*, Sölle speaks of the experience of suffering endured by the one who suffers.³¹

PHASE ONE	PHASE TWO	PHASE THREE
mute	lamenting	changing
numb explosive		
speechless	aware, able to speak	organizing
moaning	psalmic language	rational language
animal-like wailing	rationality and emotion communicated together	
<i>isolation</i>	<i>expression, communication</i>	<i>solidarity</i>
the pressure of suffering turns one in on himself	the pressure of suffering sensitizes	the pressure of suffering produces solidarity
autonomy of thinking, speaking, and acting lost	autonomy of experience (can be integrated)	autonomy of action that produces change
objectives cannot be organized	objectives utopian (in prayer)	objectives can be organized
reactive behavior dominated by the situation	suffering from the situation and analyzing it	active behavior helping to shape the situation
submissiveness	suffering	
<i>powerlessness</i>	<i>acceptance and conquest in existing structures</i>	<i>acceptance and conquest of powerlessness in changed structures</i>

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The first phase of pain leaves one “numb and mute,” a type of suffering that occurs when one is reduced to silence in view of their suffering. Here, in her estimation, one ceases to act as a human agent, because suffering has reduced the self so much that they are consumed by their pain, resulting in an abandonment of hope, stripped of the capacity to think, speak, and

³⁰ Dorothee Sölle, “Nkosi Sikekek’ I Afrika,” in *Against the Wind: Memoir of a Radical Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 126.

³¹ See her chapter “Suffering and Language,” in *Suffering* 61-86.

³² *Suffering*, 73.

act.³³ The options for the one who suffers is either to repress the suffering, become indifferent to it, and become sick on account of it, *or* to work on the suffering.³⁴ Said alternatively, both for the one who suffers and the one who seeks to turn toward the cries of the suffering, suffering demands attention if it is to be transformed.

The healing of such suffering demands that there is a way of speaking one into being that leads to liberation. It is through speaking that suffering can be conquered, because for people to speak is to refuse powerlessness. As she wrote: “The conquest of powerlessness—and this may at first consist only in coming to know that the suffering that society proceeds can be battled—leads to changing even the structures.”³⁵ It is, as Audre Lorde penned:

and when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid
So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.³⁶

According to Sölle, movement against powerlessness is achieved not through the will to power but via mysticism which allows one to move deeply into the mystical reality and union with the love of God and refuses to surrender power to death dealing structures and systems. Here society’s capacity to turn toward the suffering becomes important, for the sufferer cries out “Believe me!” which is its own lament. Indeed, in the move to phase two, the ones who suffer

³³ Ibid., 69-70.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 73.

³⁶ From Audre Lorde, "A Litany for Survival," in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* 255-256 (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997), 256.

find a voice and name their pain as outcry.

In the third and final phase, the victim moves into action for liberation. Though the move between these phases produces its own kind of suffering, it is different in nature, for as the victim/survivor moves between phases two and three they are restored to deepened levels (or new levels) of human agency. The move toward liberation and against oppression and suffering is discovered in a conquest of powerlessness that leads to the changing of oppressive structures. This movement, Sölle noted, is both for the one who suffers and the one who wishes to embody a political theology that seeks liberation in view of suffering. This three-fold dance shapes my own efforts and work in an ethics of formation that can refuse violence and oppression, calling attention, cultivating a language of outcry, and inviting the community into solidarity and action in view of suffering.

Attention: Political Theology as A Hermeneutic of Hunger and the Ones Who Suffer

Why are you so one-sided
 people often ask me
 so blind and so unilateral
 I sometimes ask in return
 are you a christian
 if you don't mind me asking

And depending on the answer I remind them
 how one-sidedly and without guarantees
 god made himself vulnerable in christ
 where would we end up
 I offer for consideration
 if god insisted on bilateral agreements
 with you and me
 who welsh on treaties
 by resorting to various tricks where would we end up
 if god insisted on bilateral agreements
 before he acted

Then I remind them
 that god didn't come in an armored car

and wasn't born in a bank
 and gave up the old miracle weapons
 thunder and lightning and heavenly hosts
 one-sidedly palaces and kings and soldiers
 were not his way when he decided unilaterally to become a human being
 which means to live without weapons

—Dorothee Sölle, “Unilateralism or god’s vulnerability”³⁷

Sölle understood political theology as a hermeneutic that redefines theology in terms of praxis.³⁸ As I noted above, Sölle wrote about her approach in *Political Theology* as she engaged in critical conversation with Rudolf Bultmann. His work, she argued, provides a starting point for developing a political hermeneutic which reads Biblical texts critically, but is without an eye to liberation in the social-political realms. Her hermeneutic furthers and is distinguished from his work and, as she understood the hermeneutical task, connected a critical reading with liberation in view of three vital aspects: understanding one’s social-political context, seeking transformation of both the individual and social spheres, and engaging with Jesus as a political figure. This is the work of paying attention to suffering in order that there might be liberation. This is the same dual move I make in my work: challenging our community to become awake and pay attention so that we might re-engage our faith and the Bible with a hermeneutic of liberation in order to be Christian in our time.

The Hermeneutics of Hunger: The Social-Political Context & The Longing for Liberation

Sölle named her approach to the Bible “hermeneutic of hunger.” In this methodology, one looks to one’s context until it cries out for theology, where we recognize we need God and

³⁷ Dorothee Sölle, “Unilateralism or god’s vulnerability,” in *Of War and Love*, trans. By Rita and Robert Kimber (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 58.

³⁸ In this way she follows the work of Metz. See: Metz, *Faith in History and Society*.

hunger for God's intervention in the midst of the distress, looking for that which speaks to us in the midst of our despair, our hunger for liberation.³⁹ This political hermeneutic reads the gospel through Jesus' life, attempting to discover and apprehend the values Jesus stood for and against, reading in view of the current societal context as the reader-in-community discerns how to live and order their lives.

This move to a Christian hermeneutic centered in liberation, in many ways, is a disruption of dominant US Protestant Christian hermeneutics which are, as was the case in Germany, focused on the individual. Throughout my sermons, however, I seek to press the community to examine the Bible and their faith anew in view of our political moment, bringing together both the inner life and transformation with the outer life and public praxis and liberative efforts, seeking a kingdom coming here on earth as it is in heaven.

Sölle's hermeneutic makes ideology critique a pathway whereby theology is evaluated in view of its societal implications; this hermeneutic becomes an instrument for self-criticism within theology, allowing the gospel to be read for the problematic ways it becomes complicit inside societal ideologies that are destructive for human flourishing. This perspective is necessary today as well as wherever theology has become synonymous with the project of whiteness where to be a white American Christian is to fly flags and sport bumper stickers that read: "God. Guns. Family. Country."⁴⁰ Sölle wrote of her perspective:

Political theology is rather a theological hermeneutic, which, in distinction from a theology that interprets reality from an ontological or existentialist point of view, holds open on horizon of interpretation in which politics is understood as a comprehensive

³⁹ Dorothee Sölle, *On Earth as in Heaven: A Liberation Spirituality of Sharing* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993), xi.

⁴⁰ For further study of this phenomena see, for instance: Langman, et al. *God, Guns, God and Glory*.

and decisive spirit in which Christian truth should become praxis.⁴¹

We only understand the gospel and its import as we engage with the political realm of life or as we become aware of how the possibility of life is dictated by the social reality that is shaped by the political dimension of our lives. For when Jesus speaks of life, it is life that must be for all and is mediated politically. For Sölle, this hermeneutic presumes that the social situation is that which can be understood and apprehended and therefore can potentially be transformed.⁴² Thus, one must be able to pay attention in order to hear the cries and places where our world is in need of liberation. Likewise, I understand much of my work as a minister to be naming the social realities and suffering in order that we might wrestle with how to be and become Christian in our time.

Transformation of the Individual & Social in View of the Ones who Suffer

Importantly, this hermeneutical effort is not only about looking abstractly for where the world is in need and hungers/longs for liberation, but it also seeks the transformation of the individual and social-political spheres through attunement to the embodied cries of the ones who suffer. Sölle's writing in *Political Theology* first bears witness to Sölle's lifelong journey of wrestling with faith oriented to praxis in view of the social situation. For Sölle, though the disruption of theology began for her (consciously) after Auschwitz, it continued until the end of her life as hers was a political theology that demanded a holistic and global liberative vision: a lifelong conversion and call to respond not only to the signs of the times but to hear and respond to the cries of the suffering and the dead, those who societal power structures would rather wish

⁴¹ Sölle, *Political Theology*, 59.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 60.

remain silenced. For Sölle, the call of the God, who is love, demands no less than listening and seeing; said alternatively, it demands that we pay attention. The life of faith must move one more deeply into the reality of the conditions and identities that shape our lives and experience, seeking a theology that brings redemption and liberation to both the individual and society.⁴³

Throughout Sölle's work, the sign of the times itself is not an abstract construct but that within which the subject and subjectivity are considered. Sölle's writing critiqued the formation of the bourgeois self who refuses to acknowledge the signs of the times, calling the bourgeois subject to become disrupted by suffering and oppression so that one might take up responsibility and resist in view of the ones who suffer.

As her work and reflection upon what it meant to do theology from her particular location evolved, Sölle employed Christian theological language to make sense of the ethical responsibilities of Christian persons. One of the ways she attended to this work was through her explication of sin. Here, like in all of her theological imaginations, Sölle was concerned to counter "orthodox" understandings of sin which, by naming it Original Sin, identified it predominantly on the individual level, grooming within Christians both a sense of resignation to sin's inevitability that too easily prevents the self from answering the moral demand to pay attention to and take responsibility for sin on a societal level. Thus, similar to other feminist theologians, Sölle defined sin as apathy and/or collaboration.⁴⁴ Apathy, to her mind, was deeply connected to the fear of what seeing demands and extracts from the self. Sin as collaboration

⁴³ She continually argued that you cannot understand existence apart from social context. See for instance: *Political Theology*, 43.

⁴⁴ See, for instance: Saiving Goldstein, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View;" Rebekah Miles, "Freeing Bonds and Binding Freedom: Reinhold Niebuhr and Feminist Critics on Paternal Dominion and Maternal *Constraint*," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 16 (1996): 121-143; Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace*.

expands the theological conception of sin in order to make sense of one's being complicit in the economic, political, and societal ministrations of evil.

Sölle explored the formation of the bourgeois subject whose life and being is characterized by apathy and being complicit through the operation of what she names “Christofascism.”⁴⁵ Christofascism is that which enables the operation of the “Death Machine.”⁴⁶ It is Christianity which weds the language of faith with various forms of fascism, capitalism, and nationalism. As such, it generates selves who, upon hearing the cries of the innocent and suffering throughout the world, refuse them.

Though Sölle's work had long been shaped by her critique of the formation of the bourgeois subject, she only employed the language of Christofascism only after she witnessed the political and religious landscape particular to the United States in the 1980s.⁴⁷ Throughout the years, the particular signs of the times to which she responded changed—whether it be a civil war in El Salvador, the Vietnam War, ecological crisis, or potential nuclear holocaust—each demanding a reckoning from theology. And in view of each “sign of the times,” Sölle wrote from her location and in view of a lifetime of shame that she believed was necessary to carry as a German person in order to be honest before God and others.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ See especially: Dorothee Sölle, *The Window of Vulnerability: A Political Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

⁴⁶ This was already explored above. “The Death Machine,” according to Sölle, operates as the nexus of three particular forms of oppression—racism, sexism and capitalism. This system operates so as to swallow up all human and non-human communities in its insatiable hunger toward empire building and quest for power. She explores these themes in *Of Love and War* and then responds to its operation in other “signs of the times” locations of state violence in Brazil, El Salvador and Guatemala. Dorothee Sölle, *Of Love and War*.

⁴⁷ For more on this, see: Dannis Matteson, “Hope Requires Participants: Dorothee Sölle's Task and Warning for the Trump Era,” *New Theology Review*, 30, no. 20 (2018), 20-30.

⁴⁸ This is where I would counter the work of Keshgegian who is, in my estimation, too critical at points of Sölle, for Sölle was quite clear that her own identities figured heavily in her theology. See: Flora A. Keshgegian, “Witnessing

A bourgeois formation of self occurs in a political theology which privileges privatized notions of sin that allows for refusals to examine the social realities of sin and injustice.⁴⁹ Not only this, but it is a faith that conceptualizes the subject's relationship to the world wherein the self exists in perpetual servitude to a sovereign God. The operation of a sovereign entity becomes transferred to the political sovereign, demanding obedience as a political virtue. Sölle argued that the subject who was wrought in the fires of obedience is prevented from accessing their fear, or said alternatively, the self seeks to structure themselves so as to refuse the terror that is demanded by subjectivity itself and the work of actually becoming a responsible self.

In responding to the cries of the suffering and the particular location and content of the signs of the times as they evolved and came into being, Sölle continued to develop her political theology as a way (in part) of working out of her own redemption narrative in view of her social location as a German Christian, privileged person. Though it was not until later in her life as she encountered the feminism of her colleagues in the United States at Union that she consciously reflected upon what it meant to move in the world as a woman, she was long aware of how her and others' identities mattered for how one does or does not respond to the gospel invitation—an invitation to be ruptured in view of the sign times and the ones who suffer.⁵⁰

Stepping back, this intersection of a hermeneutic of hunger that operates in view of the longing for liberation of the social situation and in view of the cries of the suffering resonates

Trauma: Dorothee Sölle's Theology of Suffering in a World of Victimization," in *Dorothee Sölle*, ed. Sarah K. Pinnock (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2003): 93-108.

⁴⁹ For a robust exploration of the political implications of privatized notions of sin and forgiveness, see Sölle, *Political Theology*.

⁵⁰ See for instance Sölle, "Half the Sky" where she talks about the influence of her relationship with her feminist American Colleagues and how this impacted her. Sölle, "Half the Sky," in *Against the Wind*, 65-72. See also: Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The Feminist Liberation Theology of Dorothee Sölle," in *The Theology of Dorothee Sölle*, ed. by Sarah K. Pinnock (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2003): 205-221.

with my sermons. It is central to my intentional naming of the legacies of genocide and racism within our own country, while naming particular stories of the suffering. Not only do I name injustice on the systemic or external levels, as in the suffering of the ambiguous unknown other, but in my preaching and teaching I am intentional in naming my own suffering and cries for liberation and longing in my life, inviting others also to examine their own sufferings. If we cannot pay attention and attend to the suffering in our own stories and our desires for liberation then we remain unable to pay attention to the hunger for liberation in the world. In other words: we must do our inner work so that we might join with all those who suffer in the work of liberation.

Jesus as Political Figure: The Gallows and The God Who Suffers With

In 1982 Moltmann published *The Crucified God*. In the next year, Sölle's *Suffering* offered a counter to his vision of the cross inside of political theology. Sölle began *Suffering* with a narration of an abusive marriage, arguing that the "ought" of Christian piety, which would ask the abused one to rejoice in her suffering, is an untenable position. Yet for Moltmann, she argued, this is precisely the God he offers: one who suffers with those who suffer through the suffering of Christ on the cross but also one who is author of this suffering: a unity which cannot be tolerated or maintained if it is to assist those who suffer in the world. Sölle thus critiqued what she names as Moltmann's fascination with God's brutality and connects his theological position as having resonance with the type of formation of the self that allowed the SS to engage in genocide while being decent family men, arguing that his theology normalizes sadism as norm of theology which "school(s) people in thought patterns that regard sadistic behavior as

normal.”⁵¹

Sölle critiqued any notion of a God as all-powerful and thus the cause of suffering. Instead, she demanded that God be re-understood in Christ as the God who suffers and is powerless *alongside of us*. In *Suffering* she referenced the work of Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel who, in *Night*, tells the story of two Jewish men and a boy who were assembled before the inhabitants of the camp and hanged. One of those gathered cried out: “Where is God?” For Wiesel, the answer is, “here he is – he is hanging here on this gallows.”⁵²

For Sölle, this story made clear two important aspects of the cross: one, that God comes to earth and is found on the gallows; two, the ones who suffer in our time bear witness that everyone who suffers is truly the child of God. As she noted, “God is not in heaven; he is hanging on the cross. Love is not an otherworldly, intruding, self-asserting power – and to meditate on the cross can mean to take leave of that dream.”⁵³ The memory of the cross animates the present realities and sufferings throughout history. The cross is like Wiesel’s gallows and its memory both lays bare the evil of all such places of death in our world and also bears witness to a way of being whose only power is love, a love which is stronger than death.⁵⁴

For Sölle, it is not just the cross that matters for our political theology, but also the resurrection. Though the resurrection contains within itself hope, it is not just as a one-time event, but is the promise of possibilities for resistance against death in all of its

⁵¹ Sölle, *Suffering*, 27-8.

⁵² Sölle, *Ibid.*, referenced and discussed on 145-150.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁵⁴ *Creative Disobedience*, xix. In noting this, I also want to be clear that there are significant differences between Jewish theology and Christian theology.

manifestations.⁵⁵ This memory, following Metz, is the memory which helps us to resist evil.⁵⁶

The cross functions as a memory that becomes important in animating memory in the social sphere. It serves as a challenge against forgetting, disrupting the allusions, and bearing witness to all entities of death dealing in our world. The cross helps us to preserve memory and aids us in resisting oppression. It is only with the cross that we can be truly human, for there one is able to resist and become more human through the lessons of the dead.⁵⁷

By the time Sölle wrote *The Silent Cry*, her notions of suffering and what attention means in view of the silence of God became more complex. She shifted from transformation to resistance as the goal of agency in view of suffering. The silent cry is also the name for God. In this way silence is a sign of presence rather than absence. Silence is not muteness nor is it absence: it is an invitation into the way of life. As she writes: “There are human beings who not only hear the ‘silent cry’, which is God, but also make it heard as the music of the world that even to this day fulfills the cosmos and the soul.”⁵⁸

Thus the power of the memory of the cross opens both the sufferer and the oppressor to the truest reality that mystical contemplation knows: the God beyond all Gods, which is love. The role of the church then is to carry this memory and to call us to attention to acknowledge crucifixions wherever they happen and work diligently for not only resurrection, but liberation

⁵⁵ For instance, see her way of naming this in *Suffering*, 150.

⁵⁶ See: Metz, *Faith in History and Society*. As it relates to Sölle’s conception of the memory of suffering, over her lifetime she moved from a Christocentric theology to one that was more Theocentric, allowing her to more easily articulate theological imagery for a secularized and pluralistic world, yet throughout her work the centrality of the suffering and vulnerability of God in Christ (though not in its singularity) animates the possibility of hope and resistance for all of the crucifixions in our world. See, for instance, Sölle’s chapter “The End of Theism,” 171-182, in *Thinking About God* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1990).

⁵⁷ “Waking Up,” in *Against the Wind*, 17.

⁵⁸ Sölle, *The Silent Cry*, 298.

for all.

God as the one who suffers with and is discovered on the cross appears throughout my sermons and is a necessary corrective in order to form Christians who embrace not a theology of glory but a theology of cross, where we can re-see the cross as the location whereby we, through weakness, join God in turning to the ones who suffer in our world. As a part of this, Jesus must be seen as a political figure who is crucified not on account of my individual sin but as one who is a threat to the empire and the reaches for power in our world. Thus we are called to pay attention to our world—the social situation, the cries of the suffering—and then to re-approach the Bible and our faith in order that we might discover the liberative powers and possibilities therein.

Outcry: Theo-Poetry and the Liturgy of Resistance

He needs you
 that's all there is to it
 without you he's left hanging
 goes up in Dachau's smoke
 is sugar and spice in the baker's hands
 gets revalued in the next stock market crash
 he's consumed and blown away
 used up
 without you
 Help him
 that's what faith is
 he can't bring it about
 his kingdom
 couldn't then
 couldn't later
 can't now
 not at any rate without you
 and that is his irresistible appeal

—Dorothee Sölle, “When he came”⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Dorothee Sölle, “When he came,” in *Revolutionary Patience*, 7.

If the first move of Christian political theology is to pay attention and employ a hermeneutic of hunger toward liberation, then the second move of Sölle's political theology is that upon paying attention, one moves to outcry against suffering and oppression. According to Sölle, this work is realized through theo-poetry and collective liturgies of liberation that say "NO!" to the forces of the death machine while constructively calling forth the vision of another kingdom. In seeking an ethics of outcry, I turn to the formation of the self who can articulate a theo-poetic liturgy of liberation through embrace of the rupture that not only demands an account but also takes up responsibility for resistance and the work of self-transformation in view of the ones who suffer.

Politisches Nachtgebet: Theo-poetry as the Prayer of Resistance

The *Politisches Nachtgebet* (1968-1972) were central to Sölle's political and theological coming-of-age, moving her more deeply into the social situation. The services were structured to include sharing the latest political information in conversation with the Christian scriptures, reflection and meditation, and calls to action. In her memoir, *Against the Wind*, Sölle named the *Politisches Nachtgebet* as "the experiment of a group of people who wanted to put into practice the statement that faith and politics are inseparable."⁶⁰ As those gathered would collectively name:

I believe in Jesus Christ
 who was right when he
 "as an individual who can't do anything"
 just like us
 worked to alter every condition
 and came to grief in so doing

⁶⁰ Solle, *Against the Wind*, 37.

I believe in Jesus Christ
 who is resurrected into our life
 so that we shall be free
 from prejudice and presumptuousness
 from fear and hate
 and push his revolution onward
 and toward his reign ⁶¹

The central aim of this collective work was to seek the gospel's liberative power and possibility in opposition to the workings of "The Death Machine," which operates so as to swallow up all human and non-human communities in its insatiable hunger toward empire building and the quest for power. Sölle explored these themes in *Of Love and War*, responding to its operation in other "signs of the times" locations of state violence in Brazil, El Salvador and Guatemala.⁶² As Christians who seek to resist the Death Machine, we are called not only to engage in a hermeneutic of liberation and praxis, but this hermeneutic calls us to a particular type of response. It calls us to be poets, which is to say that we are ones who pray. The language of theology must become political and poetic.⁶³

The call to be poets then is not just one of writing poetry (though her work includes much of it), but it is a call to prayer, a political prayer that is an embodied witness to hope that resists the Death Machine. As Sölle wrote of theo-poetry: "Christianity presupposes that all human beings are poets, namely that they can pray. That is the same as seeing with the eyes of God."⁶⁴ In *Politisches Nachtgebet*, theo-poetry becomes liturgy, the work of the people: political prayers were public litany connected with the operation of the psalms in Jewish worship, aiding the

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶² Dorothee Sölle, *Of Love and War*.

⁶³ Dorothee Sölle, "Breaking the Ice of the Soul: Theology and Literature in Search of a New Language," in *The Theology of Dorothee Sölle*, ed. Sarah K. Pinnock (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2003): 31-44.

⁶⁴ See: Oliver, *Dorothee Soelle: Essential Writings*, 231.

gathered community in participation in the mystical invitation, tending to reality and seeing it for what it is, and naming the horrors of the world that cannot be captured in any other form of language.⁶⁵ The theo-poetry of the liturgy functioned as witnessing, refusing the Death Machine's attempts to make us forget, calling us to attention, outcry, and action.

Sölle called Christians to prayer as a way to revolt and refuse the world as it is, confronting evil through participation in a spirituality of resistance that is animated by God in prayer.⁶⁶ As she penned: "To pray is to revolt. The one who prays is not saying, 'That's the way it is and that's that!' The one who prays is saying, 'That's the way it is, but it should not be that way.'"⁶⁷ Prayer becomes a way of refusing to accept silence. Prayer is a form of truth telling. Prayer is cooperation with God and participation in God's resurrection.⁶⁸ Prayer is the way of life which opens us to the music that fills our souls and to make other worlds possible. As Sölle noted, "Prayer is an all-encompassing act by which people transcend the mute God of an apathetically endured reality and go over to the speaking God of a reality experienced with feeling in pain and happiness. It was this God with whom Christ spoke in Gethsemane."⁶⁹ This is not the prayer of supplication, but of the mutuality of a relationship that invites each one and the community who prays deeper into praxis and participation in the work of liberation through union with love.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ For more on this see her text *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, esp. pages 81-89.

⁶⁶ See: Dorothee Sölle and Fulbert Steffensky, *Not Just Yes and Amen* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985).

⁶⁷ Sölle and Steffensky, *Not Just Yes and Amen*, 40.

⁶⁸ For more discussion on this see: Andrea Bieler, "The Language of Prayer between Truth Telling and Mysticism," in *The Theology of Dorothee Sölle*, ed. Sarah K. Pinnock (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2003): 55-70.

⁶⁹ *Suffering*, 78.

⁷⁰ See: Sölle and Steffensky, *Not Just Yes and Amen*, 40.

Sölle’s move to outcry through prayer and theo-poetry has been a conversation partner in my own work and wrestling to find a language for “a world come of age.” Long ago I ceased listening to the Christian Contemporary music of my youth as it seemed too disconnected from the world and the language that people employ in their daily lives (for, indeed, who walks around speaking of the “glory of God” in general conversations?). My turn to popular music is and has long been its own form of outcry; it is a way of naming the longings for God’s resurrection in this life and world. In the years since I have been at the church, I have consciously employed poetry and music to make connections between our faith—which has often been both privatized and non-integrated with the rest of our lives—and the music and rhythms of our daily lives. This liturgical insertion has moved beyond my sermons and teaching illustrations to now replacing the music and normative liturgical elements in our Alternative Service. In this space, following Sölle and the work of the *Politisches Nachtgebet*, we center on a theme and consider it from multiple locations, employing music and poetry as ways of naming (outcrying) our collective desire and search for resurrection in this life.

Liturgy: The Work of the People for Liberation

God has no other hands than ours.

—Dorothee Sölle⁷¹

While theo-poetry is something that might be performed alone, it is important to note that for Sölle, theo-poetry transpired in the midst of the gathered community. Since publication of her first written works, community functioned centrally to Sölle’s political theology. Thus, it is no surprise that her conception of theo-poetry likewise demanded a collective crying out with

⁷¹ *Suffering*, 149.

others, aiding us in keeping the memory and knowledge of the suffering before us. The gatherings were evening prayers where those gathered listened to stories of injustice, voiced concerns, and planned ways of action that included public protest, which is to name these prayers as true political liturgy: the work of the people.⁷²

The context provided the space for political consciousness-raising and action-planning all within the scope of liturgy. It is this work of the people that is the movement and role of the church: church as the gathering of the people so that they might, as in the early church, hold everything in common and resist empire through prayer and action.⁷³ While the gathering of the church and the work of the people is consciousness-raising, action planning, and the living out of faith, it is also the place where stories are remembered and shared with one another. As the ancient Israelites reminded each other through their texts and liturgy, their God was the God of a people whose stories they carried within their own collective story. Liturgy likewise carries memory that inspires us to live with such courage and hope.⁷⁴ Church as the gathered community performs liturgy that animates the work of salvation in our time as we co-labor and co-participate in the being of God's body in and for the liberation of the world. As Sölle wrote: "That is church: that we are never alone, never alone in our dreaming, never alone in our defeats."⁷⁵

My efforts to articulate and embody a feminist political theological ethics of formation are not just a call to the individual's formation but engage both the individual call to become Christian *along with* the call to a community to become Christian. This is important because if

⁷² Renata Wind, *Dorothee Soelle—Mystic and Rebel: The Biography* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 72.

⁷³ Dorothee Sölle, "The Church in the World: *They Had Everything in Common*," *Theology Today* 42, no. 2 (1985): 217.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 219.

resistance is to be sustained it will be because we are not alone, and what is liturgy and church if not reminders that we are together in the laboring? Though historically this gathering in person has been recognized as “church,” through the years I have found that the gathered church is also mediated through our social media as we outcry one with another, dreaming dreams, lamenting, longing, and calling each other toward visions of the beloved community in a world fraught by suffering and oppression.

Action: Mysticism, Solidarity, and Love’s Action *Sunder Warumbe*

It’s not you who should solve my problems, God,
 but I yours, God of the asylum-seekers.
 It’s not you who should feed the hungry,
 but I who should protect your children
 from the terror of the banks and armies.
 It’s not you who should make room for the refugees,
 but I who should receive you,
 hardly hidden God of the desolate

You dreamed me, God,
 practicing walking upright
 and learning to kneel down
 more beautiful than I am now,
 happier than I dare to be
 freer than our country allows.

Don’t stop dreaming me, God.
 I don’t want to stop remembering
 that I am your tree,
 planted by the streams
 of living water.

—Dorothee Sölle, “Dream Me, God”⁷⁵

Mysticism & Resistance: Opening to Love

Throughout Sölle’s work, there exists a dialectical tension between her self-

⁷⁵ Sölle, “Dream Me, God,” quoted in Wind, *Dorothee Soelle*, 1.

understanding as a mystic and her articulation of the ways in which mysticism opens oneself to love and the work and movement of God in the world. In her book *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, Sölle references the work of Catholic lay theologian Friedrich von Huelgel who states that all living religion is a unity of the institutional, the intellectual, and the mystical. Sölle writes of the mystical dimension as that of the intuitive-emotional element that is directed to the will and action of love. She names the mystical element as that which would not let her go. She writes: “In a preliminary way, I can simply say that I want to live, understand, and make known...the love *for God*.” Mystical sensibility thus was also an act of resistance for Sölle. She pointed to the mystics who have been reformers such as Teresa of Avila, Thomas Müntzer, and Daniel Berrigan. This is the life that makes possible the refusal of the death dealing ways of this world and a movement more deeply into the love and message of Jesus where we, collectively, become the tree of life.⁷⁶ Mysticism as the love for God rooted in apolitical and praxis orientation was the central animating force in Sölle’s work.⁷⁷

If mystical love for God is the animating location for resistance, then fear is the antidote that prevents love’s action in the world. Sölle wrote that fear is a necessary part of the human condition. However, the problem comes as we seek to run from it, hiding ourselves from knowing about suffering and the machinations of the Death Machine, believing ourselves powerless in front of it. Such fear curtails one’s capacity to be human, let alone to be Christian. She wrote of fear’s inhibiting action:

(Fear) blocks my powers, and makes a helpless thing of me, a person who cannot give herself up to the powerful current of love and cannot join in the struggle. The fear of

⁷⁶ Dorothee Sölle, *Theology for Skeptics: Reflections on God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 104.

⁷⁷ Sölle, “Introduction,” in *The Silent Cry*, 1.

fear finishes me off. Fear and the fear of fear stand between me and love.⁷⁸

This “fear of fear” is the fear that made possible the rise of National Socialism and all moments and places where oppression and violence is possible.

Believing deeply in the Christian themes of conversion, redemption, renewal, and resurrection, Sölle in no way believed that the self grotesquely molded to be apathetic and cooperative with the Death Machine is or ought to be a death sentence. No, there is a pathway toward redemption for all human persons that is pervasive inside of her theology. Indeed, this is the pathway she sought to realize in her own life: the pathway of forgiveness and healing toward becoming truly human which demands measures of self and social criticism, refusal of the ministrations of fear. This pathway asks for a lifetime of conversion where one speaks a clear “NO!” against death⁷⁹ and a “Yes!” to the letting go of ego as one is subsumed into God, who is love, the place where one becomes vulnerable and lives in the world as God in Christ did: human and unarmed willing to go to one’s death so that resurrection might be possible in our own time.⁸⁰ As she wrote:

The basis of spiritual renewal is not the guilt feelings that frequently arise in sensitized individuals in rich industrial societies. Instead, it is a crazy mysticism of becoming empty that reduces the real misery of the poor and diminishes one's own slavery. Becoming empty or “letting go” of the ego, possession, and violence is the precondition of the creativity of transforming action.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Sölle, *Of War and Love*, 25.

⁷⁹ In Sölle’s “Unilaterally for Peace,” she writes: “I want to tell you what I have learned from such bitter and demeaning experiences: a measure of inner independence. There are issues for which you must go into the streets and speak a clear ‘no’ in your workplace or in the union. If they tell you it will not do any good, and has no chance whatever, you must do it anyway, if only for the sake of your own human dignity, if only to be able to look your own children in the eye. If you keep silent today and allow yourself to be used, you are already dead. You have armed yourself to death!” See: Dorothee Sölle, “Unilaterally for Peace,” *CrossCurrents* 33, no. 2 (1983): 142.

⁸⁰ This is precisely the challenge of God in Christ: “God, too, acted in a mighty unilateral manner when he began to live unarmed and vulnerable, that is, as a human being.” See: Sölle, “Unilaterally for Peace,” 145.

⁸¹ Sölle, *The Silent Cry*, 253.

For me, this is especially important as a theological ethicist, seeking to overcome the separation of religion and ethics and living into the space “where mysticism and resistance come together in praxis.”⁸² To move into these streams of water and live as a tree of life asks that we engage the journey of decent and re-discover a self who is wrought in the fires of love that seeks freedom and the promised land for all.

Joining God Without a Why

For Sölle, liberation was about the collective, about our social and political lives, and about the becoming humans in our own souls, choosing to join God as the ones working out liberation as *cooperator dei*. To do so requires community because this relationship demands a vulnerability for “Only life that opens itself to the other, life that risks being wounded or killed, contains promise. Those who arm themselves are not only killers; they are already dead.”⁸³

Sölle’s spiritual stance was one of resistance, and her response to God was rooted in Meister Eckhart’s idea of “living without a why.”⁸⁴ This is the mystical journey highlighted in Sölle’s final book, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*. The title voices Sölle’s conviction that the relationship between mystical experience and social consciousness is tantamount to a spiritual life. Thus we live in the *sunder warumbe*, “without a why.”⁸⁵ This spiritual practice focuses on living life in the present moment, letting go of the compulsive need to see results from our prayers. Such a person is truly free to respond to God’s grace as it influences their life.

⁸² Ibid., 5. She writes: “If it is true that God is love, then the separation of religion and ethics...is dangerous as well as detrimental to both sides...the relationship between mysticism and resistance must be understood more radically.”

⁸³ Dorothee Sölle, “We Want Peace, Not Security,” in *The Window of Vulnerability*, 7. This whole book articulates a particular type of way of being in order to embody Sölle’s vision for political theology.

⁸⁴ For more on this see, for instance: John M. Connolly, *Living Without Why: Meister Eckhart’s Critique of the Medieval Concept of Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁸⁵ This phrase is Meister Eckhart’s description of essential being, the innermost ground of life itself.

In a culture which has known itself as a significant actor in the world, this move of joining God's work without a why is terrifying, yet is necessary if we are to work against the forces of white supremacy and resist in the time of American Christian Nationalism, for the lie pervasive in the white American Christian church is that God's presence is obvious when there is "success" in terms of numbers and influence. Yet the way of mysticism and resistance reminds us that the measure must be sought both in our living and knowing love and the tangible struggle for freedom and liberation sought by Christians in our world.

Solidarity and Resurrection Life

This action is derived from a resurrection hope and life which is born witness in our lives when we refuse death for "the only possible proof of Christ's resurrection and our own would be a changed world, a world a little closer to the kingdom of God."⁸⁶ Resurrection is linked with liberation and has a social dimension that is not about personal immortality but a life before death for everyone. As she noted "where there is solidarity there is resurrection."⁸⁷ Thus our call is to be a people in solidarity with the sufferers; it is the call to be people of true "sanctuary" as the church in the world.⁸⁸

Resurrection is connected to the building up of new kinds of communities who work and live in solidarity with one another in the bringing of the kingdom of God and the things of resurrection life. This resurrection means forgetting the language of the oppressor, changing one's lifestyle, and living in a new community. For Sölle, struggle and contemplation came together in this resistance and the act of prayer in the words of poetry bring about the new

⁸⁶ Dorothee Sölle, *Choosing Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1981), 87.

⁸⁷ *Choosing Life*, 89.

⁸⁸ See: "Sanctuary," in *Against the Wind*, 134-139.

Kingdom through a communal life with one another.⁸⁹ Far from a hopeless acquiescence to the inevitability of suffering, suffering takes on meaning and form in making other worlds possible that we co-labor together. As she noted “we are capable of suffering because they’re capable of love.” For the “pain of birth encourages future of life.”⁹⁰ To this work, to this labor of love and liberation, Sölle gave her life’s work.

Implications for a Feminist Political Theological Ethics of Formation

Those in power can no longer overlook the handwriting on the wall
 their subjects think twice about nodding in agreement
 the weapons dealers no longer dare to walk all over the weak
 bishops stop equivocating and say no
 the friends of Jesus block the roads of overkill
 school children learn the truth

How are we to recognize an angel
 except that he brings courage where fear was
 joy where even sadness refused to grow
 objections where hard facts used to rule the day
 disarmament where terror was a credible deterrent

Fear not resistance is growing

—Dorothee Sölle, “Fear Not”⁹¹

There are many implications of Sölle for my work. Amongst them is my own sense that I must take responsibility for myself and my own story. While her awakening was wrought in the recognition of the stark and horrific divergence between her own story and that of Anne Frank, my own awakening has been wrought in the fires of deep awareness of my own formation as a white woman in the United States. As I write this section, I live in the wake of the murder of

⁸⁹ For more see: *Choosing Life* and also “Sanctuary,” in *Against the Wind*, 134-139.

⁹⁰ *Against the Wind*, 79.

⁹¹ Sölle, “Fear Not,” in *Of War and Love*, trans. by Rita and Robert Kimber (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 74.

George Floyd in my city. My coming to be a pastor at Colonial Church (not Meetinghouse) is deeply connected to my own attempt to take up responsibility for my own identity and locatedness and turn to my communities to ask to us to become Christian.

This becoming Christian is no small thing but the work of a lifetime; for indeed, the operation of Christofacism and the Death Machine are alive and active in the world and in my community of faith as well. As will become more evident in the subsequent chapters, at times I feel like I am ministering in a time where the formational call to resistance and move toward liberation is nearly impossible given how total the Death Machine of American Christian Nationalist's politics and Fox News' lies are in the lives and minds of a portion of our congregation. In Sölle, I find a mentor and fellow sojourner to encourage and challenge me to take the long and global view of the work of liberation and a spirituality of resistance.

As in Sölle, I too have a deep sense that there is a vital and necessary connection between mystical animation of experiencing the world "without a why," opening to suffering and the invitation of love *and* the work of resistance and activism and communal formation. Indeed, her major political work took place in the midst of community, from the *Politisches Nachtgebet* to the theo-poetic renderings of liturgies and work of the people for resistance. In the structure of the following chapters this dual connection between the inner life and transformation and the responsibility of a particular kind of becoming of a community in view of embodied context and historical realities pervades my sermons and ethical invitations.

Finally, from Sölle I take encouragement in hope that another world is possible, that in this skin, in our bodies, in this world resurrection is possible. Healing and life can and do and will persist, and my and our work as people who claim the name Christian is to be about this good work of love and liberation. As I invite people to do this work, I tend to my own: showing

up in this body and voice as a feminist minister, seeking to live and call people to be Christian in our time.

I believe in god
 who did not create an immutable world
 a thing incapable of change
 who does not govern according to eternal laws
 that remain inviolate
 or according to a natural order
 of rich and poor
 of the expert and the ignorant
 of rulers and subjects
 I believe in god
 who willed conflict in life
 and wanted us to change the status quo
 through our work
 through our politics

I believe in jesus christ
 who was right when he
 like each of us
 just another individual who couldn't beat city hall
 worked to change the status quo
 and was destroyed
 looking at him I see
 how our intelligence is crippled
 our imagination stifled
 our efforts wasted
 because we do not live as he did
 every day I am afraid
 that he died in vain
 because he is buried in our churches
 because we have betrayed his revolution
 in our obedience to authority
 and our fear of it
 I believe in jesus christ
 who rises again and again in our lives
 so that we will be free
 from prejudice and arrogance
 from fear and hate
 and carry on his revolution
 and make way for his kingdom

I believe in the spirit

that jesus brought into the world
in the brotherhood of all nations
I believe it is up to us
what our earth becomes
a vale of tears starvation and tyranny
or a city of god
I believe in a just peace
that can be achieved
in the possibility of a meaningful life
for all people
I believe this world of god's
has a future
amen

—Dorothee Sölle, “Credo”⁹²

⁹² Dorothee Sölle, “Credo,” in *Revolutionary Patience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977), 22-23.

PART III
FEMINIST POLITICAL THEOLOGICAL ETHICS:
A CONTEXTUAL EXPLORATION

CHAPTER FIVE
THE SERMON, THE PREACHER, AND A FEMINIST
POLITICAL THEOLOGICAL ETHICS OF FORMATION

I won't stay quiet, I won't stay quiet
'Cause stayin' silent's the same as dyin'
I won't stay quiet, the flicker's burnin' low
This is not a, this is not a
Swan, swan song
This is not a, this is not a
Swan, swan song
We just gotta, we just gotta hold on tonight
This is not a, this is not a swan song, swan song
Swan dive
Yeah, it's a new life

—Dua Lipa, “Swan Song”¹

I turn now to my constructive project as evidenced through my contextual work as a minister and the sermons I have preached therein. My sermons are the most obvious way to make clear my broader work as a minister and feminist theological ethicist, highlighting the role of the preacher as the communicator of scripture and the one who calls the community to particular ways of becoming. I begin by detailing why I turn to sermons and outline how I conceive of the role of minister as preacher. Next, I explore the content of the sermons, naming the moral formation I intend both to resist and constructively, to aid in cultivating. Finally, I end the chapter with a general introduction to the ethical framework I employ in analyzing my work, pointing to where I will go in chapters six and seven. Then, in those next two chapters, I move

¹ Dua Lipa, “Swan Song,” single from *Alita: Battle Angel (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack)*, Milan Records, 2019, Spotify Streaming Audio, <https://open.spotify.com/track/5600nq7TiBraBX2jobyJ3l?si=93a2e604f11945c0>.

between the sermons and my constructive framework as I seek to embody a feminist political theological ethics that invites my community to be and become Christian in the face of American Christian Nationalism.

Why Sermons?

There are many reasons why I turn to sermons as contextual artifacts to aid in making clear the contours of my feminist political theological ethics of formation and the content of what it means to be and become Christian in the face of American Christian Nationalism. These include that the sermon is the central space where ethical formation of the community and individuals both transpires and is codified; additionally, I do so because of their function in the community as prophetic speech and poetry; and finally, I employ sermons because they demonstrate my efforts at finding language for faith in a world come of age and the theo-poetics necessary to resist American Christian Nationalism and its machinations.

What is a sermon? In *A History of Preaching*, O.C. Edwards Jr. begins by noting that a sermon is:

A speech delivered in a Christian assembly for worship by an authorized person that applies some point of doctrine, usually drawn from a biblical passage, to the lives of the members of the congregation with the purpose of moving them by the use of narrative analogy and other rhetorical devices to accept that application and to act on the basis of it.²

Understood alternatively as that which is intended to “evoke the Christian imagination,”³ or “a

² O. C. Edwards Jr., vol. 1 *A History of Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004): 3-4.

³ Daniel M. Bell Jr. “Preaching and Evocative Objects for Faith Formation,” in Brian K. Peterson, *Proclaiming the Gospel: Preaching for the Life of the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009): 183.

communal practice”⁴ where the “form of public discourse in which God is recognized as being related to human beings not just individually but in the full context of their existence.”⁵ Or “the vehicle of theological proclamation,”⁶ which is “a social act.”⁷ Or as predominantly about inculcating people with “sound doctrine.”⁸ Fundamentally, sermons are the central communicative and formative space in the life of the majority of Christian churches.

As such, sermons are not just written texts, but are representations of the communicative communal act which seeks to educate, enlighten, shape, guide, and form a community in the ways of being Christian. They are then also sites of ethical reflection and praxis. In 1966, W. Walter Johnson wrote in “The Ethics of Preaching:”

The sermon in the setting of corporate worship of the church is an act of obedient ethical responsibility, and that the issues that are focused in this act are determinative issues for the entire life of the church. The sermon is thus a model of ethical responsibility for the church which, because of its central location and crucial function in the church, is a creative factor in the total integrity of the church. What happens in the sermon is constitutive for the life of the congregation and is thus a pivotal factor in both the renewal of the church and the ethical integrity of the church.⁹

⁴ Tony S. Everett. “Gospel Proclamation and the Life of the Church: Preaching Ethics Ethically,” in Brian K. Peterson, *Proclaiming the Gospel: Preaching for the Life of the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009): 178.

⁵ Though this is an older book, its influence remains up to today and it speaks to the task of preaching in powerful ways: Arthur Van Seters, *Preaching as a Social Act: Theology and Practice* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), <https://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/introduction-widening-our-vision/>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “Effects of Sound Doctrine,” April 22, 1860, vol. 6, *New Park Street Pulpit*, <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons/effects-of-sound-doctrine/#flipbook/>.

⁹ Johnson, W. Walter. “The Ethics of Preaching.” *Interpretation* 20, no. 4 (1966): 412-413. For other works on ethics and preaching see, for instance: Arthur Van Seters, *Preaching and Ethics* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004); Brian K. Peterson, *Proclaiming the Gospel: Preaching for the Life of the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009); Ronald D. Sisk, *Preaching Ethically: Being True to the Gospel, the Congregation, and Yourself* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2008); Charles L. Campbell, *The Word before the Powers - an Ethic of Preaching* (London: Westminster John Knox, 2002).

Though I disagree with many aspects of his ethics of preaching, in the above named ways I agree with him and likewise affirm that this is why I turn to the sermons.¹⁰ Sermons are the most tactile evidence of my vision for an ethics of formation; they are codified and recorded responses to particular concerns of what it means to be and become Christian in that particular time and space. Additionally, sermons are the place where a minister is afforded the most significant platform whereby they might foster moral formation in the congregation. It is as Walter Brueggemann writes of sermons and the act of preaching, noting that:

The key hermeneutical event in contemporary interpretation is the event of preaching. The preacher either intentionally or unintentionally is convening a new community. This recognition will help us see why preaching is such a crucial event not only in the life of the church, but in our society. We must interpret to live. There is almost no other voice left to do interpretation on which society depends that is honest, available, and open to criticism. Most of the other acts of interpretation that are going on in our midst are cryptic and therefore not honest, not available, and not open to criticism. The preaching moment is a public event in which society reflects on what and who it will be, given the memory of this church and given a post-modern situation in society.¹¹

As such, I understand the sermons to function as poetry, as story, as prophecy, and as a call to moral formation. They function as my own theo-poetry and outcry as I seek to name the vision I have for the ethical formation of ourselves that we might be and become Christian. In this way they are also a way of talking back and part of a liturgy and litany of resistance in the face of

¹⁰ He argues that ethical responsibility demands we base the sermon on the biblical witness. W. Walter Johnson, 420. He names the ethical task of the one who speaks to be the one who first hears (Ibid., 421). He critiques the preacher who doesn't seek to re-hear the text but is just content with the traditional reading (Ibid., 424). He argues that the work of the preacher is not to be a prophet but as one who hears the prophets and then brings that to the congregation as one who is a vicarious hearer (Ibid., 425). Thus, we pay attention to our context (Ibid., 428). And "To refuse to pursue the question of radical change effected in our situation by hearing of this word is to be ethically irresponsible (Ibid., 429)." For, "the renewal of preaching is rooted in the awakened awareness of the sermon as a manifestation of ethical responsibility." (Ibid., 431)

¹¹ Walter Brueggemann, "The Social Nature of the Biblical Text for Preaching," *Preaching as a Social Act: Theology and Practice*, ed. Arthur Van Seters (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), <https://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-4-the-social-nature-of-the-biblical-text-for-preaching-by-walter-brueggemann/>.

Christian Nationalism, for poems and story are a medium of and for ethics.¹² For if, as Thomas H. Troeger has argued, “politics begins in poetry, in the metaphors, myths, and symbols that command our loyalties and organize our social consciousness,” then indeed, part of the function of sermons are to tell particular kinds of stories, to populate myths that might animate the moral imagination of the individuals and of the community so as to cultivate what Troeger labels the “mythical poetic world of the heart.”¹³ For it is through this mystical-poetic storytelling that the sermon can become the formative space for Christian becoming—animated by a story other than American Christian Nationalism.¹⁴

The sermons are also a place where it is clear how I understand the role of scripture in moral formation for the Christian and how I bring together my autobiographical speech (as a feminist act) into conversation with the experiences of others as I issue the call and vision of what it means to be and become Christian. In this way, my sermons are feminist action toward

¹² For more on this see, for instance: Kenyatta R. Gilbert, “The Community’s Sage: The Preacher’s Call and the Congregation’s Response,” *Liturgy* 35, no. 3 (2020): 17–24. Gilbert writes that “decolonized preaching, runs in diametrical opposition to such practices for it is neither individualistic nor personality-driven. Rather, it springs from spiritual encounters with God and anti-autocratic engagement with listeners. This involves a continuing moral commitment to kingdom ethics on the part of the preacher and congregation.” (23) See also: Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, expanded ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); Richard L. Eslinger, *Narrative & Imagination: Preaching the Worlds That Shape Us* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995). For more on moral identity and narrative ethics and the language I employ here on poetry being a medium of and for ethics see: Hille Haker, “The Fragility of the Moral Self,” *Harvard Theological Review* 97, no. 4 (2004): 359-382; Hille Haker, “Narrative and Moral Identity in the Work of Paul Ricoeur and Contemporary Ethics,” in *Memory, Narrativity, Self and the Challenge to Think God: The Reception within Theology of the Recent Work of Paul Ricoeur*, eds. Maureen Junker-Kenny and Peter Kenny, vol. 17 *Religion—Geschichte—Gesellschaft. Fundamental Theologische Studien* (Münster, Germany: Lit Verlag, 2004), 134-152.

¹³ Thomas H. Troeger, “The Social Power of Myth as a Key to Preaching on Social Issues,” in *Preaching as a Social Act: Theology and Practice*, ed. Arthur Van Seters (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988), accessed online: <https://www.religion-online.org/book-chapter/chapter-6-the-social-power-of-myth-as-a-key-to-preaching-on-social-issues-by-thomas-h-troeger/>.

¹⁴ See also: Czeslaw Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1983); Frank Burch Brown, *Transfiguration: Poetic Metaphor and the Languages of Religious Belief* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1983); Paul Scott Wilson, *Preaching as Poetry: Beauty, Goodness, and Truth in Every Sermon, The Artistry of Preaching Series* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014).

justice and equality and are birthed through my own formation. This means that my sermons are not tomes of rigid truths (which would be unable to actually offer up a true counter to the machinations of American Christian Nationalism), but rather are, as Lucy Atkinson Rose writes: “tentative interpretations, proposals that invite counterproposals, and the preacher’s wagers as genuine convictions placed in conversation with the wagers of others.”¹⁵

The study of the art of preaching/sermon giving is called homiletics, which comes from the Greek word *homilēō*, which means “to converse or talk with.”¹⁶ And indeed, sermons are a type of talking with and to a community and a people therein. They are not solitary disconnected written texts but are given at a particular moment to a community who is living in a particular time and place. In this way, they cogently articulate both my attempts to speak in view of the “signs of the times,” and to develop renewed language that can preach in the midst of a world come of age. They are the language then of both description and analysis but also remembrance—reminding us who we are called to be as Christians and as the church in our time.

¹⁵ I will say more about power and authority in the next section, but Rose’s early text on women and preaching raises questions provoked by feminism about authority and power and offers a conversational model of preaching. Rather than preaching being about persuasion, Rose argues that the focus ought to be on tentative interpretations to which the church returns while also listening to new voices and, when needed, revising previously held interpretations. See: Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997): 100. For more on the female preacher see, for instance: Carol Marie Norén, *The Woman in the Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991). Zoe Bennett Moore, *Introducing Feminist Perspectives on Pastoral Theology* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002). She writes: “it is appropriate . . . to start from life experience and to move to a theorizing of that experience and to a critique of existing theory, that feminist pastoral theology will involve a critique of existing Christian beliefs and doctrines, and finally that it is the aim of feminist pastoral theology to renew and transform belief and practice” (Bennett Moore, 138). See also: Janet Wootton, *Introducing a Practical Feminist Theology of Worship* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); Mary Donovan Turner and Mary Lin Hudson, *Saved from Silence: Finding Women’s Voice in Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999); Eunjoo Mary Kim, *Women Preaching: Theology and Practice through the Ages* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2004); Jana Childers, ed. *Birthing the Sermon: Women Preachers on the Creative Process* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001); Katie Lauve-Moon, *Preacher Woman: A Critical Look at Sexism Without Sexists* (New York: Oxford University, 2021); Benjamin R. Knoll and Cammie Jo Bolin, *She Preached the Word: Women’s Ordination in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹⁶ For more on this see: Richard W. Voelz, “Questions for Conversational Preaching,” *Interpretation* 75, no. 2 (2021): 136.

The Minister as Preacher

In this section I name the different aspects of what it means to be a minister who preaches and what “the minister as preacher” opens up and means for my work. The roles of the minister as preacher that are most operative in my work are the preacher as the midwife of freedom and holder of formational space, the preacher as prophet/truth-teller and facilitator of encounters,¹⁷ and the preacher as storyteller and visionary leader. I conclude this section by talking about what it means to be a feminist preacher and why it is important to name myself as such.

The Preacher as the Midwife of Freedom and Holder of Formational Space

My work as a minister is largely about coming alongside a community and the individuals therein in the work of formation. I desire to be a “midwife of freedom,” aiding persons in their own becoming and helping to usher forth new communal becoming in the great Exodus tradition. Naming the work of the preacher as that of a “midwife of freedom” signals that there is formational work to be done, for obviously, there are places of non-freedom in both our individual and our communal lives.¹⁸ This is a central belief and aim of my efforts: the white church in America is largely captured by the narratives of Christian Nationalism and white body supremacy. The effort to aid the church in being Christian and developing the capacity to change its ways and join with God in the work of life demands that we get free from our continuing role as a modern-day Egypt (an empire) and move into the work of getting ourselves free, following

¹⁷ In naming the preacher as the facilitator of the encounter I am in part deeply indebted to and follow the work of Martin Buber and the concept of the relationship of I-thou. See: Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2010).

¹⁸ Kenyatta R. Gilbert’s beautiful essay “The Community’s Sage: The Preacher’s Call and the Congregation’s Response,” takes up this question, noting: “The question this essay addresses is how well does the preacher’s spiritual formation and hermeneutics (interpretive strategies) help the listening community answer its questions about community restoration and hope?” See: Gilbert, 17.

in the Hebrew tradition.¹⁹ In this way, being a “midwife of freedom” is a political act, for, like the midwives in Exodus, it seeks confrontation with power and makes possible other ways of being, which are accomplished through the task of preaching and narrating the call to other worlds and ways of being.²⁰ To be a “midwife of freedom” as a preacher then is also the work of coming alongside of the individuals in the community in their becoming. Through sharing my story and incorporating psychological resources in conversation with scripture, I foster space for people to become awakened and to move more deeply into self-healing, love, and liberation.²¹

¹⁹ In employing the phrase “white body supremacy,” I am following the work of Resmaa Menakem in *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2017). Also, I think it is important to note that the white church in America is not synonymous with the Hebrew people of the Exodus narrative. No, we are much closer to being Egypt during the Exodus or the Roman Empire during the time of Jesus. For a beautiful example of a white minister who wrestles with what it means to preach about racism in America see: Timothy Leitzke, “Preaching as Cultural History,” *Liturgy* 35, no. 3 (2020): 10–16. He wrestles with Bultmann’s methodology and writes: “What must I do as a (white) preacher about race in America? Following Bultmann’s method, I can both name the historical reality of how whiteness benefits me and my white congregation and proclaim how Christ is now part of our history, calling us to abandon our false identity of whiteness for our true identity in Christ. Race is a theological problem. Bultmann’s theology is a tool to use against it.” (15)

²⁰ In his introduction to the 2019 issue of *Anglican Theological* on preaching, Michael B. Curry tells the story about a minister who was invited to preach in apartheid South Africa and was cautioned not to speak of the sociopolitical situation, but to “preach only from the Bible.” So that is what he did. Curry details how the minister quoted the Exodus narrative, quoted Jesus’ words in Luke 4, declaring freedom for the oppressed. He continued, only preaching passages of scripture...passages about the call and cry for freedom, the cry against oppression. Likewise, Curry argues, we are called to preach freedom...and this is why preaching matters. See: Michael B. Curry, “Preaching Matters,” *Anglican Theological Review* 101:1 (2019): VII–VIII.

²¹ Tending to the self of the preacher is vital in preaching—we must do the work that we seek to invite the community to likewise journey—in this way the minister is one who bears witness to the possibility of resurrection and new life. Though much preaching instruction focuses on delivery and technique, it is to this work of getting free oneself that I think is of utmost importance. It is said that Howard Thurman also believed that if one wishes to be an effective preacher, “the focus should not be on the principles of homiletics but rather, on cultivating a deep spirituality.” See: Gilbert, “The Community’s Sage,” 20. Tony S. Everett also writes of this, stating: “Preaching ethically requires attention not only to the preacher’s own formation in hearing the word, but to the congregation’s as well.” (Everett, “Gospel Proclamation and the Life of the Church,” 179).

Also, note that throughout the dissertation, and in particular in the sermons, you will note the language of being “born again/reborn.” I am grateful to Hille Haker for a conversation in which she highlighted the importance of my other language of being woke/awoken. Though I employ the language of being born again (and again) to intentionally disrupt the Evangelical call that people must be “born again,” and seek to expand the vision and radically alter what it might mean, there is also something important to note about turning to the language of “woke/awaken” for my vision of what it means to be and become Christian in the world. This is because: (1) The idea of being “woke/awakened” is the language of social justice movements—to “be woke”—and, indeed, the call to

To name the preacher as that of being a “midwife of freedom” is dependent upon Donald and Clare Winnicott called the “holding environment.”²² This space is necessary for the work of midwifery because the call to radical political, communal, and personal change is a scary undertaking for many, and if they will even dare to say yes to these invitations, then it is important for the preacher to model the possibility and hope of such an undertaking. Said alternatively, my ministry as a preacher is about letting the community know that though the task of birthing themselves and the community anew will be painful, they will be safe in the undertaking. In my sermons I am intentional about naming the personal work that I have done and my ethical evolution and formation, inviting others into the journey that I myself have also taken and am still set upon, curating space for the being and continual becoming of the community I am leading.

The Preacher as Prophet/Truth Teller and Facilitator of the Encounter

The role of the preacher as prophet is deeply connected to the roots of the prophet’s role in the Jewish faith tradition. From Nathan’s confrontation of David following his commissioned murder, military cowardice, and rape of Bathsheba, to the cries of prophets like Jeremiah, the

embody justice is to thus be awakened; (2) This language is also important as my work seeks to critique the infantilizing of people under authoritarian faith systems, and my call that we are to be grown up in our faith. In calling people to this “grown up” faith, I am not asking people to become new babies, but to become more responsible and accountable moral agents—thus the “midwifery” I engage in as a minister is to help adults become fully responsible moral selves who are awakened in new ways as I seek to empower their agency in their own self-emergence; (3) The language of awakening/taking up moral agency and responsibility is pervasive throughout feminist discourse. See, for instance: Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1993); Michelle Dean, “Adrienne Rich’s Feminist Awakening,” *The New Republic* (April 3, 2016), <https://newrepublic.com/article/132117/adrienne-richs-feminist-awakening>.

²² Again, as noted in chapter 1, Donald Winnicott was a British psychoanalyst who wrote on object relations theory and argued the holding environment provided for the infant by the mother and is a vital space for their development. This theory translated to an understanding that in psychoanalysis the therapeutic space is vital for the client to safely explore potentially overwhelming feelings. For some of the original outlining of his work see: Winnicott, *The Child, The Family and the Outside World* and *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment*. And, again, his spouse actually originated the term. See: Britton, “Casework Techniques in the Child Care Services.”

prophet is vital in calling Israel to remember who they are meant to be.²³ The role of the pastor as prophet and truth-teller is evident in the Christian tradition as well from pastors in the early church such as John Chrysostom to Archbishop Oscar Romero to civil rights leaders in the United States such as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.²⁴

In this way, the minister as prophet functions in such a way as to both detail honestly

²³ In the Hebrew Bible, of the 24 books, the Nevi'im (prophetic books- which translates as "spokespersons") comprise eight of them, including: The Former Prophets of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings; the Later Prophets of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve (one book comprised of: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi). See: Judith R. Baskin, ed. "Prophets (Nevi'im)," *The Cambridge Dictionary of Judaism and Jewish Culture* (New York: Cambridge Press, 2011.): 497. For more on Nevi'im's role in the Hebrew Bible see, for instance: Marc Zvi Brettler, "Introduction to Nevi'im," in *Engaging Torah: Modern Perspectives on the Hebrew Bible*, eds. Walter Homolka and Aaron D. Panken (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 2018), 87-98. Brettler notes that the later prophets play a more significant role inside of post-biblical Judaism and that most medieval interpreters understood the later prophets as "voicing universal, ever-relevant truths." (Brettler, 98). For more on the prophet's role in Jewish society see: Victor Harold Matthews, *The Hebrew Prophets and Their Social World: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).

²⁴ John Chrysostom was famously prophetic in his preaching. I will never forget when I read his sermon "An Address on Vainglory and the Right Way for Parents to Bring up Their Children" when I was in seminary. From point one through point fifteen (!) he paints a stark picture of the evils of vainglory. Utilizing analogies, he compares vainglory to a wild circus, a harlot with a lovely face, and fruit from Sodom. In each case, the effects are death and destruction. Whether it was coming against vainglory, or critiquing the Empire, John Chrysostom prophetically named the gospel as he understood it. See: James Daniel Cook, *Preaching and Popular Christianity: Reading the Sermons of John Chrysostom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). For more on Romero's preaching see: Kerry S. Walters, *Saint Oscar Romero: Pastor, Prophet, Martyr* (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2018). And a wonderful representation of his sermons can be found in: Óscar A. Romero and James R. Brockman, *The Violence of Love: The Pastoral Wisdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988). For a wonderful collection of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr.'s sermons see: Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love*, Fortress Press Gift Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010). For more on the call of the minister to be a prophet see: Justo L. González and Catherine G. González, *Liberation Preaching: The Pulpit and the Oppressed* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980); Filip Grujić, "Towards Contextual Prophetic Preaching," *Kairos* 14, no. 1 (2020): 73–84. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001); Charles L. Campbell, *The Word before the Powers*; Linda L. Clader, *Voicing the Vision: Imagination and Prophetic Preaching* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2003); David P. Gushee and Robert H. Long, *A Bolder Pulpit: Reclaiming the Moral Dimension of Preaching* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1998); David Schnasa Jacobsen, "Schola Prophetarum: Prophetic Preaching Toward a Public, Prophetic Church," *Homiletic* 34, no. 1 (2009): 12–21; Marvin A. McMickle, *Where have all the Prophets Gone? Reclaiming Prophetic Preaching in America* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006); Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010). Mary Donovan Turner, "Prophetic Preaching," in *The New Interpreter's Handbook of Preaching*, ed. Paul Scott Wilson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 101–02. Phillip J. Wogaman, *Speaking the Truth in Love: Prophetic Preaching to a Broken World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998); Walter Brueggemann, *Truth-Telling as Subversive Obedience* (Eugene, OR.: Cascade Books, 2012); Frank A. Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018).

what is going on in the world and to call the Christian and community to be/become Christian in view of it. It is a call, as Karl Barth is reputed to have said to his students, to “keep the bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.”²⁵ It is also the call, as Ignacio Ellacuría of the Salvadoran Jesuits who were assassinated named it: “to realize, shoulder, and take charge of the weight of reality.”²⁶ In this way, preaching is also resonant with Dorothee Sölle’s work around suffering which calls us to attention, outcry, and action,²⁷ or what former professor of preaching and worship Christine Smith named both the work of preaching and her book on preaching: *Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance*.²⁸

The preacher partakes in a dance of seeking understanding of the world as it is in all of its beauty and complexity, integrating the call of the scriptures toward love, shalom, freedom, and justice in the public sphere and toward love, transformation, and becoming more human on the

²⁵ For more on this see: Charles R. Peterson, *With Bible in One Hand and Newspaper in the Other: The Bible in the Public Square* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2018).

²⁶ For more on Ellacuría, his life and vision see: Jon Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom*; Teresa Whitfield, *Paying the Price: Ignacio Ellacuría and the Murdered Jesuit Priests of El Salvador* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994). Ellacuría completed his doctoral work with Dr. Xavier Zubiri in the 1960s. Zubiri is well known for his analysis of reality, describing God not as an object within reality, but as the grounding of reality. This philosophical orientation led Ellacuría not to avoid the injustice and suffering in El Salvador, but rather “intensified Ellacuría's desire to bring to his theological work a genuine encounter with reality and to have that theological work address the tragic reality of EL Salvador.” (See: Michael Edward Lee, “Liberation Theology's Transcendent Moment: The Work of Xavier Zubiri and Ignacio Ellacuría as Noncontrastive Discourse,” *Journal of Religion* 83, no. 2 (2003): 234. Ellacuría developed his own theo-ethical methodology by playing with the Spanish word *cargo*, meaning a heavy load, duty, or burden. He calls the movements of awakening: “*el hacerse cargo de la realidad*,” “*el cargar con la realidad*,” and “*el encargarse de la realidad*.” These three phrases may be translated: “realizing the weight of reality,” “shouldering the weight of reality,” and “taking charge of the weight of reality.” For more on his work on *la realidad* see: Kevin F. Burke, *The Ground Beneath the Cross: The Theology of Ignacio Ellacuría* (Washington, DC: Georgetown, 2000), 100-8.

²⁷ See my chapter on Sölle and also Sölle’s chapter “Suffering and Language,” in *Suffering*, 61-86.

²⁸ Christine M. Smith, *Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance: Radical Responses to Radical Evil* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992).

personal level.²⁹ In his seminal work on prophetic preaching, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann, writes that prophetic preaching "is grounded in the alternative narrative that insists upon discerning life with reference to the God who dominates and occupies that narrative."³⁰ He cautions/encourages the prophetic preacher though that most people do not actually want the dominant narrative questioned, yet this is the role of preaching in the midst of community.³¹

In seeking to be prophetic by calling the community to remember who we are to be in the world, and being one who tells the truth and embodies the dance that calls people to learn of reality, to lament and grieve, to take up responsibility in view of it, and then to act toward justice and kingdom building, the way into this is not just through facts and data but through the work of encounter. Brueggemann writes: "Prophetic preaching does not put people in crisis. Rather, it names and makes palpable the crisis already pulsing among us...calling people to chose life."³²

²⁹ This is, in part, how I interpret the Pauline language of "the flesh" versus "the spirit." To live by the Spirit is to be transformed by love on the individual level so that we might live as Christians in the world. In naming this work as a dance, I am thinking of both Emilie M. Townes language of "the womanist dancing mind" which enables one to resist the "fantastic hegemonic imagination" and also of Richard Rohr's language of the dance of the triune God. There is something to this image of dancing that both involves the body and also allows for and invites for a creative movement in the world in seeking to preach in such a way that is responsible in view of reality and the call to be and become Christian. See: Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2006); Richard Rohr (with Mike Morrell), *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2016). Of prophetic preaching, Filip Grujić writes: "Prophetic preaching calls for strong and bold challenging of principalities and powers at work in our world and taking the side of the marginalized and disenfranchised in the conflict with these powers. Continuing the ministry of Jesus that was prophetic in both word and in liberating action, the church in its different cultures and contexts must find new ways to get the prophetic message across and take a stand for those that cannot stand for themselves." (Grujić, "Towards Contextual Prophetic Preaching," 82)

³⁰ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 6.

³¹ Here I also want to name that though I am focusing on the role of the minister as the prophet, it is important to name that being a prophet does not require one to be a larger than life figure like MLK or Romero, but is something that we can all take up in being people who are committed to speaking truthfully and reminding one another of our call to be a people of life.

³² *Ibid.*, 18-19.

This is the work of encounter with the remembrance of who we are called to be, the encounter with the struggle and the suffering in our world, but it is also the encounter with the minister who is embodied. For when the prophet comes, they come not just with a message but in human flesh, inviting and challenging the community through their presence and witness as the prophet in their midst.

Every time I preach, I am conscious that my body itself demands an encounter. For those unaccustomed or uncomfortable with women and gender equality, my body presents a text of confrontation and exposure of their bias and fear. I press this further by not seeking to be a disengaged or distanced religious figure, but rather strive to make myself explicitly human. Here my prophetic work is that of a feminist, not as a spokesperson for God come from on high), and I share my story and my own struggles and victories as a way of humanizing the prophetic task and the weight of solidarity. This is meant to serve as a model for the task of liberation and formation, recognizing that the weight of it is often much to bear and can be a scary undertaking.³³

I also see myself as the prophet who facilitates the encounter with the neighbor. This is

³³ I will say more about this below, but think it is important to name how being embodied in a body that is coded as female is, in itself, a prophetic message to a church where to date in the United States only lead 14% of churches. See: Chaves, *Congregations in the 21st Century America*, 36. In book *Preacher Woman*, Katie Lauve-Moon also notes: “Given that women often centralized values and initiatives of social justice, they were also the only pastors in the study to be described in the following terms: biased, challenging, agenda- driven. Male pastors were never described in this way in survey responses. These types of adjectives are commonly used to describe women acting on feminist values of liberation, inclusion, and equity in various fields, including religion and politics. In particular, the words biased and agenda-driven suggest that these pastors were pushing more than what others perceived to be the neutral mission of the church or the status quo. In other words, rather than using their platform and position for a neutral or centrist message, some congregants perceived women pastors as instead using their voices to push a more leftist feminist agenda.” (Lauve-Moon, *Preacher Woman*, 171). For more, see also: Heather Matthews, “Uncovering and Dismantling Barriers for Women Pastors,” *Priscilla Papers* (February 3, 2022), <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/article/priscilla-papers-academic-journal/uncovering-and-dismantling-barriers-women>.

why I bring to bear voices of others in my sermons so that those stories and realities that may have not been listened to or dominant in my church context might receive a hearing and demand an account from the community and individuals therein.³⁴ Finally, the work of the preacher as prophet is to facilitate an encounter for the community with God. It is like when Jonah went to the people of Nineveh, his task was to call the people to an encounter with God that they might be changed though (though, much to his anger, they actually did change!).³⁵ The preacher as prophet aids a community in remembering its call and mission of who they are and are to be in the world. The one who is a truth teller and is committed to elucidating the conditions of reality must name with honesty the suffering, oppression, and injustice in our world as well as beauty and hope and possibility, and then invite people into transformational encounters with themselves, with the self of the minister, with others, and with God that the community might be changed and transformed.³⁶

The Preacher as Storyteller and Visionary Leader

The final role of the preacher that I wish to highlight is the preacher as a storyteller and visionary leader. In this way, the preacher tells the stories of our faith and is the keeper of our collective memory. They tell the stories to those who have yet to hear them and re-telling them to

³⁴ Here I am thinking of Butler's work in Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University, 2005).

³⁵ When Jonah (finally) goes to Nineveh, they repent and change their ways and Jonah is angered by this transformation, instead, he wishes that God would have destroyed them.

³⁶ This truth telling work of the preacher for, as Camus writes: "What the world expects of Christians is that Christians should speak out, loud and clear, and that they should voice their condemnation in such a way that never a doubt, never the slightest doubt could rise in the heart of the simplest man. That they should get away from abstraction and confront the blood-stained face history has taken on today. The grouping we need is a grouping of men (sic) resolved to speak out clearly and pay up personally." (Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* (New York: Knopf, 1961): 71).

those who need to hear them again. But this task is not just about surfacing the story of the text, rather it is also about the story of our world and the story of an active and alive community. The work of the storyteller is to employ stories so as to help form the people and shape them.

The preacher is also to tell the story of the vision of what might be— to remind people of the coming promised land or of the coming kingdom so that the people do not get weary and lose heart. In this way, the preacher has the task that Moses did, a tradition which Martin Luther King Jr. consciously named in his final speech that he delivered on the night before he was assassinated: the work of the preacher is to tell the people of the beauty of the world that you can see from the mountaintop. It is as he preached:

We need all of you. And you know what's beautiful to me is to see all of these ministers of the Gospel. It's a marvelous picture. Who is it that is supposed to articulate the longings and aspirations of the people more than the preacher? Somehow the preacher must have a kind of fire shut up in his bones. And whenever injustice is around he tell it. Somehow the preacher must be an Amos, and saith, "When God speaks who can but prophesy?" Again with Amos, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." Somehow the preacher must say with Jesus, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me," and he's anointed me to deal with the problems of the poor."

And as he concluded the sermon:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop.

And I don't mind.

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!

And so I'm happy, tonight.

I'm not worried about anything.

I'm not fearing any man!

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!³⁷

If the church is to be a community that can resist and truly be and become Christian in the face of American Christian Nationalism, then it must be a community that lives a different story than the story of a white-washed mythologized America. Our role as preachers asks us to be storytellers and artists who invite people into a new world and way of being human together. It is the case, as Thomas H. Troeger writes, that:

A purely rational appeal from the pulpit cannot counter the deleterious effect of the media's mythic world upon the life of faith and grace. Information and well-reasoned analysis belong in sermons, but they are ineffectual as long as the preacher has not entered the landscape of the heart and challenged the reigning metaphors of secularist national culture with the images and narratives of faith. The first step in preparing for this task is to sharpen our consciousness of those assumptive metaphors that shape and rule our own hearts.³⁸

Thus, the minister must be a storyteller and the one who brings poetry to bear in an attempt to evocatively invite the community into living a new story together. Again, as Troeger writes:

We facilitate social change, not by promulgating a particular program but by entering the landscape of the heart and revitalizing—through music, poetry and reason—the listeners' belief in the source of all just and lasting change: the risen Christ.³⁹

The Feminist Preacher

Though the above are the three particular roles of the minister as preacher, it is important to name that I am specifically a *feminist* preacher. To name myself as a feminist preacher is to acknowledge multiple things, the first being that I preach in a body that was assigned female at birth and am coded by most people as being female. In a world in which cis-gender males

³⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop," sermon given at Mason Temple, Memphis, TN, April 3, 1968, <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>.

³⁸ Troeger, "The Social Power of Myth."

³⁹ Ibid.

comprise 90+% of those who preach on any given Sunday, it is no small thing and is a rather disruptive reality for many who are steeped in sexist norms when I preach as a person who is in possession of a vulva and uterus.⁴⁰

The second aspect of naming myself as a feminist preacher is that while some women-identified persons might respond to the work of preaching in a sexist system by seeking to adhere to masculine norms for acceptable stories and ways of speaking, I turn more deeply toward my being identified as female and am very intentional about naming both my own experiences of living and preaching in a female body and in uplifting the stories and struggles that many women in our culture know. I talk about violence against women, sexism, and critique of the patriarchy, domestic, and sexual violence. I also name our embodied experiences in order to render them visible, normative *human* experiences of miscarriages, of bodies in general, and speak frequently about my relationship with my spouse (one which is deeply committed to equality) all as feminist pedagogy and praxis.⁴¹

In addition to these, I am self-consciously a feminist preacher because I am a feminist

⁴⁰ See: Mark Chaves, et al., *Congregations in the 21st Century America* (Durham, NC: Duke University, Department of Sociology, 2022), https://sites.duke.edu/ncsweb/files/2022/02/NCSIV_Report_Web_FINAL2.pdf, 36. They write: “Only 3% of predominantly white evangelical congregations were led by women in 2018–19., “Congregations in the 21st Century America.” As they note: “Only 3% of predominantly white evangelical congregations were led by women in 2018–19. And, of course, female leadership in Roman Catholic congregations remains near zero (2%).” They conclude the overall percentage of congregations led by women likely will remain well below 30% for the foreseeable future.” (38)

⁴¹ I name this here on account of the general function of sexism in our world (as Simone de Beauvoir reminds us) and then the particularity of the way in which pulpits have long been predominantly occupied by men, men’s experiences are rendered “normative” and so I very intentionally name the experiences of women in our bodies (which is upsetting for some members and they code me as being a radical feminist just for naming women’s experiences. I, however, take encouragement from authors like Bennett Moore who writes “it is appropriate . . . to start from life experience and to move to a theorizing of that experience and to a critique of existing theory, that feminist pastoral theology will involve a critique of existing Christian beliefs and doctrines, and finally that it is the aim of feminist pastoral theology to renew and transform belief and practice” (Bennett Moore, *Introducing Feminist Perspectives on Pastoral Theology*, 138).

interpreter of the texts and of our tradition. I follow the work of feminist, womanist, mujerista, and other queer liberationists in engaging in critical readings of both the texts and reproachment of their history of translation and interpretation.⁴² I engage the Bible with what Paul Ricoeur named a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” which Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza then translated to feminist biblical scholarship, expanding it to “a hermeneutics of proclamation, a hermeneutics of remembrance and historical reconstruction, as well as a hermeneutics of ritualization and celebration.”⁴³

Finally, as a feminist preacher, I am deeply aware of how my theology and ethics are personal and political. Thus, I am also intentional and careful and deeply reflective too regarding the power of my position as a minister who is given a pulpit from which to preach. I seek to hold this power wisely and with intentionality.

To Be and Become Christian in the Face of American Christian Nationalism

In my sermons I seek to form a particular kind of self and community identity that can be

⁴² Some of the earliest and most formative texts that have shaped me and my approach to scripture as a feminist include: Phyllis A. Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); Eryl W. Davies, *The Dissenting Reader: Feminist Approaches to the Hebrew Bible* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003); Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler, eds. *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006); Catherine Clark Kroeger and James R. Beck, eds. *Women, Abuse, and the Bible: How Scripture can be Used to Hurt or to Heal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996); Kwok Pui-lan, “God Weeps with our Pain,” in *New Eyes for Reading: Biblical and Theological Reflections by Women from the Third World*, ed. John S. Pobee and Barbel von Wartenberg-Potter (Oak Park, IL: Meyer Stone Books, 1987), 90-95; Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000); Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University, 1988); Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Just Wives? Stories of Power and Survival in the Old Testament and Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), 2003. Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Bread not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984); Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017).

⁴³ See: Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1970). Schüssler-Fiorenza names these as the four elements of a multidimensional feminist model of interpretation rooted in the experience and praxis of women-church. See: Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone*, 21.

and become Christian in our time. In order for that to be possible, I seek to counter dominant narratives and norms that form the moral conscience and action of most white American Christians. In particular, my sermons are consciously working against sovereignty, contra privatized “born again” faith. They are critical of the notion that we are a uniquely chosen people, are suspicious of substitutionary atonement theories, critical of white supremacy, refuse certainty and moral purity, and deviate from the reformed tradition of *sola scriptura*. Instead, the sermons are constructed to aid the community in taking up responsibility in view of the rupture demanded by our national history in view of the genocide of native persons and enslavement and abuse of other persons of color. In my sermons I then seek to engage with culture, cast a vision of diversity and equality, foster transformation and development of the self, animate moral agency, all while doing so in a world that has come of age—a time where it is less about whether God can or cannot be assumed (as was the case for those writing a New Political Theology where metaphysical arguments no longer held sway), but in a time and place where Church and religion cannot be assumed any longer.⁴⁴

Let me say more about what I work against and for. The sermons speak against sovereignty and disrupt simple obedience as the pathway to be Christian. In order to do so—as I will make more clear in the coming chapters—my work dialectally moves from understanding God as the Sovereign Father to other conceptions and images of God that can aid us in becoming human and taking up moral responsibility for ourselves. For instance, I employ conceptions of the Trinity as a way of disrupting the notion of God as the divine law-giver. Following

⁴⁴ I write this so as to name that my situation is not identical to the moment in which Bonhoeffer and later Metz, Sölle, and Moltmann were writing. I write as a white woman in 21st century America where people are open to spirituality but are no longer interested in religion or church participation as the Pew studies evidence. See: Michael Lipka, Michael, “A Closer Look at America’s Rapidly Growing Religious ‘Nones’.”

theologians like Sallie McFague, I seek new language and metaphors for God that might order to aid us in becoming Christian and human.⁴⁵

I critique the legacy of theologies grounded in God as the Sovereign Father and us as depraved children by narrating my own story and inviting people to animate their inner voices as they hear and experience the sermons. I do so as an invitation to those gathered that we might all take up moral responsibility and development of ourselves in order that we might all be grown-up people and Christians who no longer live in the shadow of a violent father who reins from above.

As I have already argued, my work as a minister seeks to critique evangelical conceptions of privatized, “born again” faith. Instead, I invite people to be born again and again and again into the rhythm of a faith that is both private and public, about inner transformation and embodied praxis. In this way, I subvert uncritical evangelical faith as the sermons seek to bring together the mystical and the political— to be a woke people/to be awakened and in this way to be born again and again. As Barth penned in his *Dogmatics in Outline*:

There must be *translation*, for example, into the language of the newspaper...Let us beware of remaining stuck where we are and refusing to advance into the world to meet worldly attitudes. For instance, in 1933 in Germany there was plenty of serious, profound, and living Christianity—God be praised and thanked! But unfortunately, this confession remained imbedded in the language of the church and did not translate into the political attitude demanded at the time in which it would have become clear that the Evangelical Church had to say 'No' to National Socialism...It was not capable of that and the results are open to the day. Think what would have happened had the Evangelical Church at that time expressed its church knowledge in the form of a worldly political attitude. A church not clear on having this duty would a priori betake itself to the graveyard...May every individual Christian be clear that so long as his faith is in a snail's

⁴⁵ The two most influential texts for me in this regard are: Sallie McFague, *Models of God*; Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*; and Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 25th anniversary edition (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2002).

shell...he has not yet come to believe.⁴⁶

I also seek to disrupt all of the legacies of our being a chosen people, a city on a hill, and a people with a “Manifest Destiny,” which are all important foundational beliefs to American Christian Nationalism.⁴⁷ I criticize white settler colonialism / white supremacy and instead encourage the community to take up responsibility for themselves as people of faith. This is a faith that takes seriously the role of education and the necessary task to learn about history, ourselves, and about all others.⁴⁸ This is a faith that refuses certainty and reaches for moral purity but instead embraces humility and a commitment to the idea that we might be wrong.

⁴⁶ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 33.

⁴⁷ See footnote 3 in chapter 1 and section two in chapter 2 for more. As a refresher here let me restate: the language of “American Christian Nationalism” refers to the mythological narration and self-understanding of the United States being a Christian nation whose “manifest destiny” is to be a “city on a hill” because we are uniquely, “God’s chosen people.” This language is all based in deep valuation of preservation of a social order based off of hierarchies of race, religion, gender and the like...and is a profoundly white supremacist reconstruction of America’s founding. For more on this see especially: Jones, *White too Long*; Whitehead and Perry, *Taking Back America for God*; Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism*; and Gorski, *American Covenant*.

⁴⁸ Bonhoeffer anticipates the importance of cultivating empathy and intercultural flexibility in learning. He notes that it is necessary if one is to take up responsibility in his discussion of the danger of the “stupid person.” See: Jonas Koblin, “Bonhoeffer’s Theory of Stupidity,” *Sprouts Schools* (October 19, 2021), accessed May 1, 2022, accessed online: <https://sproutsschools.com/bonhoeffers-theory-of-stupidity/>. Bonhoeffer writes of this in his letter “After Ten Years: An Account at the Turn of the Year 1942–1943:” “Stupidity is a more dangerous enemy of the good than malice. One may protest against evil; it can be exposed and, if need be, prevented by use of force. Evil always carries within itself the germ of its own subversion in that it leaves behind at least a sense of unease in human beings. Against stupidity we are defenseless. Neither protests nor the use of force accomplish anything here; reasons fall on deaf ears; facts that contradict one’s prejudgment simply need not be believed—in such moments the stupid person even becomes critical—and when facts are irrefutable they are just pushed aside as inconsequential, as incidental. In all this the stupid person, in contrast to the malicious one, is utterly self-satisfied and, being easily irritated, becomes dangerous by going on the attack. For that reason, greater caution is called for when dealing with a stupid person than with a malicious one. Never again will we try to persuade the stupid person with reasons, for it is senseless and dangerous. If we want to know how to get the better of stupidity, we must seek to understand its nature. This much is certain, that in essence it is not an intellectual defect but a human one. There are human beings who are of remarkably agile intellect yet stupid, and others who are intellectually quite dull yet anything but stupid. We discover this to our surprise in particular situations. The impression one gains is not so much that stupidity is a congenital defect but that, under certain circumstances, people are made stupid or that they allow this to happen to them. We note further that people who have isolated themselves from others or who live in solitude manifest this defect less frequently than individuals or groups of people inclined or condemned to sociability. And so it would seem that stupidity is perhaps less a psychological than a sociological problem.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “After Ten Years: An Account at the Turn of the Year 1942–1943,” in *After Ten Years: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Our Times*, edited by Victoria J. Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 22.

Additionally, the sermons repudiate atonement for sin models of salvation and understanding the Christ event. Instead, they are focused on metanoia as both self-becoming and the work of justice in order that we might refuse the violent machinations of American Christian Nationalism. As a part of this, my sermons consciously refuse *sola scriptura* as both methodology and practice.⁴⁹ What I mean by this is that in many protestant and Evangelical communities, traditions of interpretation are codified as *the only possible readings* of texts and these readings name themselves as being based on scripture alone. Yet the reality is, as González and González (amongst others) have argued, these interpretations are reflective of traditions that themselves have particular agendas and biases. Thus, Biblical interpretation in our time needs to be honest that no particular tradition is truly *sola scriptura*; rather, all are voiced by diverse persons who live in particular times and places, bringing with them understandings from other fields of study to the text and interpretative process. Thus, my sermons are deeply

⁴⁹ *Sola Scriptura* is the reformation affirmation of the Protestant Church that the Bible is **sole** authority for the church is the Bible. Though Luther named the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* to be our “rule of faith” against which all other knowledge is judged (Martin Luther, “The Smalcald Articles: Article II Of the Mass,” *Project Gutenberg*, accessed May 13, 2022, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/273/273-h/273-h.htm#link2H_4_0004). In the evangelical church in America (not to be confused with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America), the notion of *Sola Scriptura* functions differently. John MacArthur captures the normative Evangelical perspective when he writes that *Sola Scriptura* means: “The sufficiency of Scripture as our supreme authority in all spiritual matters. *Sola Scriptura* simply means that all truth necessary for our salvation and spiritual life is taught either explicitly or implicitly in Scripture. It is not a claim that all truth of every kind is found in Scripture. The most ardent defender of *sola Scriptura* will concede, for example, that Scripture has little or nothing to say about DNA structures, microbiology, the rules of Chinese grammar, or rocket science. This or that “scientific truth,” for example, may or may not be actually true, whether or not it can be supported by Scripture—but Scripture is a “more sure Word,” standing above all other truth in its authority and certainty...everything necessary, everything binging on our consciences, and everything God requires of us is given to us in Scripture.” How this functions in practice (I write this as one who has spent my life embedded in evangelical communities) is that most white evangelicals today take *Sola Scriptura* to mean: “I believe in the *Bible alone* as long as what that means is that my interpretative tradition which keeps me in power is the only biblical interpretive option.” The majority of evangelical preachers and cultural leaders act as if they sit outside of culture and refuse to acknowledge that their interpretation is a deeply particularized cultural one (rooted in white supremacy, patriarchy, and ensuring they stay in power). See: John MacArthur: “What Does *Sola Scriptura* Mean?” *Ligonier Ministries*, accessed May 13, 2022, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/what-does-sola-scriptura-mean>. As I note here, I do not *Sola Scriptural* is a possible nor desired way of approaching the Bible.

conversational and in dialogue with other modern disciplines and ways of knowing including poetry and other forms of art and reflection.⁵⁰

My sermons indeed seek a language for a world come of age. Thus, I work with language from our everyday lives as much as possible in order to animate a faith that is and can be integrated into the everyday rhythms of our lives so that we might truly be and become Christian.

My Ethical Framework: The Teleological and Deontological

There are particular aspects of the formation of the self and community that I endeavor to foster through my preaching. As a heuristic guide, I employ Haker's "General Framework of Ethical Reasoning," and examine both the teleological and deontological ethical impulses in my work.⁵¹ In the next two chapters, I detail and reflect upon the particular theo-ethical aims of my preaching for both the individuals and the community as a whole (the church itself) in view of both the teleological and deontological dimensions.

This framework will serve as the entry point for my reflection on the task of a feminist political theological ethics of formation. I will spend time analyzing each of these quadrants. I will then explore my ethical formational ends, tending to the performative ethics of my own embodiment as the preacher in this contextual feminist political ethics of a minister who seeks to help a community and the individuals therein to be and become Christian (teleological ethics) in the face of American Christian Nationalism. This latter fact warrants specific obligations on the

⁵⁰ For more on this see: Justo L. and Catherine G. González, *The Liberating Pulpit* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1994), 30-35. As they write about engaging the process of "ideological suspicion" of textual interpretative traditions so that "we can once again look at tradition, no longer as that which we have to oppose because it is oppressive, but rather as that which, in our struggle for liberation, we are to reevaluate and reclaim. Tradition then becomes a living reality, in which we discover many kindred spirits whose struggle was akin to ours, but who have been forgotten or obscured by an interpretation which sought to preserve the existing order." (Ibid., 35)

⁵¹ Hille Haker, "Ethical Reflexions in Nanomedicine," 71.

one hand and specific demands of justice on the other (deontological ethics).

Table 1: General Framework of Ethical Reasoning

Status of ethical reflection	Personal/Individual ethics	Institutional/Social Ethics
Teleological considerations with diverse and pluralistic answers	Self-fulfilment, well-being, contingency, happiness, convictions, values	Community values, social norms, visions of the 'common good', solidarity
Deontological considerations with universalistic normative claims	Human rights based on the respect for the dignity of others, resulting in the obligation to respect the other and support his/her flourishing	Governance and legislation based on justice: just distribution of goods, fairness and equality in access to participate in all relevant social practices, compensation and corrections of past and present structural injustice

As will become clear, my theo-ethical vision is shaped by a decidedly feminist ethic rooted in a belief that as we do our inner work and understand ourselves as beloved, as love forms us through the encounter (individual teleological ethics), this creates the possibility of demanding one's rights and taking up responsibility (individual deontological ethics). For it is only as we become Christian/human that we can also become church together (social teleological ethics), making possible the conditions for justice and the coming of the kin-dom of God (social/political deontological ethics).⁵²

⁵² In the formation course that I built at United Seminary in the Twin Cities, I began with Nouwen's *Life of the Beloved* and Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic" as the starting points for understanding as oneself as beloved (I called this the "inward journey." I then ended the course with the vision of the beloved community (MLK), calling them to "embodied solidarity." (See: Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2002). Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic." In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 53-59.) As will become clear in a subsequent section, I am a big believer that the call to being Christian is to aid in the bringing of God's kingdom as detailed in the Hebrew Bible as the vision of shalom and throughout the New Testament as the vision of the Kingdom of God/Kingdom of Heaven that is recorded and recited in many churches, including ours on a weekly basis. However, I follow the work of Ada María Isasi-Díaz as she writes about the "kin-dom" of God. See: Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

In chapters six to seven, I focus on the teleological dimension for both the individual and institutional/social ethics spheres. Here I return to the political theological explorations that I first undertook in conversation with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's work in chapter three, namely following the tri-part distinction found in the greatest commandment, asking: what does it mean to love God? To love the neighbor? To love the self? Alternatively stated, this is the work of asking: who is God, the neighbor, and the self, and then developing a teleological ethics in view of these answers. In Chapter 6, I argue that the work on the individual level is that of self-formation (the work of being Christian) and working on one's self, and in chapter seven I focus on the communal/social level (the work of being the church) as the call to be a people of breath.

In these respective chapters I highlight excerpts from sermons to make clear my perspective and the work of formation I am attempting in the congregation. I do so by uplifting the God-image that is most operative for me. I then evoke theo-ethical imagery and argue that the formation of the moral self and the church that can be and become Christian is discovered through an embrace of diversity, growth and healing, movement toward freedom, and solidarity with one's self, one's neighbor, and God's action in the world. Through the journey into the wilderness, moving into the dark and terror, and the necessary death of ego that makes possible the cultivation of a self who might truly and be and become Christian. Likewise, it is the church who embraces the breath of God (*ruach*) that leans into their call to be a resurrection people and a people of promise. Together with others, we seek the common good and flourishing life for all through solidarity and work toward freedom.

In chapter eight, I focus on the deontological dimension for both individual and institutional/social ethics, which is the political site of responsibility. On the individual level I explore an ethics of responsibility and rights, exploring questions of: "What ought we to do?"

What are our obligations? What are our rights?” This is the work of learning and unlearning our moral obligations and the responsibility we have in view of our moral agency. This is the call to respect others and to honor the dignity of all others who are also made in God’s image. It is also the work of animating the moral self of those in the community so that they might trust themselves and demand their own rights and dignity be respected.

On the institutional level I highlight the tension between the state—federal law—and justice in the moral sense. When and where the law does not live up to its own claims, I challenge the church to question and to resist, critiquing political injustice. This is the call to the church to be Christians and develop a critical relationship with Christian Nationalism. This work is necessary because Christian Nationalism stands in opposition to the call of Christ, for instead of the church functioning as a critical leavening agent against unjust political operations, Christian Nationalism seeks a complete fusion of an unjust state and white supremacist Christian ideology. It is precisely because of the danger of Christian Nationalism and its violent operation in our world that I cultivate a political theology that is both feminist but also ethical, for the church must criticize Christian Nationalism in the ways that it is both white supremacist and theocratic. This all reflects a political normative ethics rooted in justice, seeking to diminish the tension between law and justice. As such, it involves moral demands and obligations that are expected not just of the individual, but also of the Christian community: we must respect people politically and foster a world in which Black Lives and all those denied justice matter and are protected.

As the church who seeks to be Christian in the face of American Christian Nationalism,

we are called to garden living or a Kin-Dom ethics as Ada María Isasi-Díaz first named it.⁵³ This is a church that is shaped by the vision of *mishpat*, grounded in a vision for justice in the vein of the prophets such as is represented in Micah 6:8: to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God and one another. This is the work of the church in seeking *shalom* in the political sphere. This is a vision of the beloved community that is fostered through political action, discovered in the person of Jesus and following the Jesus way, not just of the cross, but as the way of life and refusal of the unjust machinations of empire in our world. Fundamentally, the deontological dimension is about the taking up of political responsibility in the face of American Christian Nationalism so that we might in truth be and become Christians and be the Church in our time.

⁵³ Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*.

CHAPTER SIX

INDIVIDUAL TELEOLOGICAL ETHICS

THE TASK OF SELF-FORMATION

When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion
of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered,
the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language,
our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.

– Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic”¹

To the place of loving one’s self that is birthed
somewhere in the darkness of what Audre Lorde has named the erotic.
The space of gestational mess that is our power.
The inner knowing.
The silences within.
The room which is one’s own (as invoked Virginia Wolf).

I was taught to fear this place,
to fear her,
to fear her knowing.
I was taught that this place was sin,
was flesh...was dangerous.

And I suppose-
no, I know now,
that the danger is real.
The danger is that when I – when we-
know this place of truth and power in our bones,
in our bodies, in our souls,
there is the space where we cannot
and *will not* be contained.

¹ Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 55.

Here is the laughter and joy
 released by women dancing round together in circles.
 Here is the naming of the agony
 of the suffering
 and violence we have known
 as we rage and mourn.
 Here—
 here is US—
 here we are.
 And **this** is our power:
 To love, to truly love
 and breathe in the/this truth:
 we are loved;
we are love itself.

So enter into the silence.
 Move tenderly toward the darkness.
 And listen closely to what she will tell/tells you.

You are.
 You are loved.
 You are welcome.
 You are seen.
 You are believed.
 You are held.

You, oh darling one, are a survivor
 and light-bearer.
 So shine on.
 And you, my sister,
 are power and fortitude,
 courage itself in the face of all that sought
 and seeks to destroy you.

Feel this silence,
 Hold yourself in tenderness.
 May this gestational earthiness
 Hold and surround you
 And birth you anew in power
 and in fierce fire of courage and surety.

To love one's self.
 Come into the darkness
 and find that love
 is you/yours.

—Sara Wilhelm Garbers, “To love (eros) One’s Self”²

We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings. But, once recognized, those which do not enhance our future lose their power and can be altered.

– Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic”³

Introduction

I believe in miracles
Cause it's a miracle I'm here
Guess you could call me spiritual
Cause physical is fear

And it's safe to say the storms gone away
And I'm dancing on the morning after
Yes I'd love to stay, but my home is the other way
And I miss the love and laughter

Something like flying
Hard to describe it
My God, I'm breathing underwater
Something like freedom, freedom
My God, I'm breathing underwater.

—Emeli Sande, “Breathing Underwater”⁴

Following Haker’s “General Framework of Ethical Reasoning” as a heuristic guide, in what follows I clarify the nuances of how both teleological and deontological ethics guide and shape my work as I seek to foster moral formation in and through my preaching.⁵ In the pages

² An opening invocation I gave at the “Love On” event on November 11, 2018, dreamed into being by Kelsey Kreider Starrs, this was a space to experience the healing presence of love in a variety of ways. In December 2021, Kelsey brought this piece as a reading for a feminist circle I gathered around me in my final month of pregnancy. Sara Wilhelm Garbers, “To Love (Eros) One’s Self,” invocation given at Love On, Minneapolis, MN, November 11, 2018, <https://sarawg.com/2018/11/11/to-love-eros-ones-self/>.

³ Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 57.

⁴ Emeli Sandé, “Breathing Underwater,” track 2 *Long Live the Angels*, Virgin, 2016, compact disc (CD).

⁵ Hille Haker, “Ethical Reflexions in Nanomedicine,” 71.

that follow I focus on the personal teleological quadrant as Haker has outlined:

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Individual teleological ethics explores notions of the good life, dealing with questions of well-being, human flourishing, happiness, and values.⁶ In this chapter, I detail an individual teleological ethics discovered through the work of self-formation. The aim is to become—to become human and to become Christian. "The good life" is realized through the becoming a self who can resist and show up in ways counter to the formation of the self rendered through American Christian Nationalism. For white Christians in particular, this task requires critical deconstruction of the dehumanizing white supremacist underpinnings of self-formation therein so that we, along with all humans and all of creation, might be able to live and flourish.

⁶ For more on Teleological Ethics, see: Jeffrey K. McDonough, *Teleology: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Andrew Woodfield, *Teleology*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Manfred Lang, "Teleology," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/obso/9780199829910.001.0001/acref-9780199829910-e-334?rskey=dQORm5&result=1>; Simon Blackburn, "Teleology," *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198735304.001.0001/acref-9780198735304-e-3056?rskey=w45s1V&result=1>.

This chapter is the longest of any of the others that follow for three reasons. The first is that much of modern Protestant Christian ethics has focused on deontological ethics through consideration of responsibility in view of rights and obligations.⁷ The second is that Christian teleological ethics has often focused on cultivation of virtues or dispositions in a more intellectual sense, whereas my work focuses on ethical formation rendered through the *encounter with God, oneself, and the other and the dispositions necessary for engaging and sustaining these encounters*.⁸ Finally, the length of this chapter reflects that the dissertation is explicitly an *ethics of formation*, focused on cultivating moral formation of the community where I minister and the members therein.

⁷ This is to say that Christian moral philosophers who seek to ground Christian Ethics in somewhere other than Divine Command Theory often (and importantly) turn to responsibility. I agree with the necessity of this task, it is just that my unique contribution and the aim of my present work is focused on self-formation. See, for instance: Niebhuhr, *The Responsible Self*; Hille Haker, "The Responsible Self – Questions after Darwin," in: *Evolution and the Future, Anthropology, Ethics, Religion*, eds. Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, and Branca-Rista Jovanovic (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2013), 21-34; William Schweiker, *Responsibility and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Gerald McKenny, "Responsibility and the Moral Subject," in *Karl Barth's Moral Thought*, 126-150 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021). McKenny argues that in Barth, divine command it is also an ethic of responsibility. For a broader philosophical approach to ethics and responsibility see: Dana Kay Nelkin and Derk Pereboom, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Moral Responsibility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022); Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000); Haker, "The Fragility of the Moral Self."

⁸ Note that when Jesus is approached by an expert in the law as recorded in Luke 10:25-37 he is asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responds, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" The teacher appropriately answers: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself." The expert of the law presses further and asks Jesus: "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus responds with the story of the man going to Jericho who is beaten and left for dead but is cared for by the Samaritan. This, for me, is the grounding of a teleological ethics discovered through the encounter where we actually embody and have the capacity to love God, our neighbors, and ourselves. For more on the virtues and Christian ethics, see: Jean Porter, "Virtue Ethics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, ed. by Robin Gill, 87-102, *Cambridge Companions to Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Methuen, 1970); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1985) and *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999); John Barton, "Virtue in the Bible." *Studies in Christian Ethics* 12, no. 1 (1999): 12–22; Joseph J. Kotva, *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics* (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 1996). Here too I am referencing Sölle's work on mysticism and am seeking to make clear the importance of the mystical encounter in and to our formation.

In turning to self-formation wrought through encounter, I distinguish my aim from any notion that the virtues or a “good life” discovered through obedience to divine commands. Since self-formation as “the one who obeys” is *precisely* that which allows the uncritical embrace of American Christian Nationalism, I instead focus on Christian virtues that I believe can aid us in discovering and cultivating the possibilities of a flourishing life for all people and our planet. In what follows, I detail the disposition or habits that aid in the task of self-formation so that we might become human, Christian persons working toward the vision of a life that is abundant and full, risking the terror elicited by the encounter with God, ourselves, and the neighbor.⁹

My first sermon at the church in 2015 was entitled “On Being Christian.” Even in the election cycle leading into 2016, I was wrestling with questions of how we might live as persons who claim the name of Christ. For to be Christian is about being rooted in love (contra divine command or obedience to a Sovereign, instead it is about transformation through being and knowing love). As I preached in that first sermon: “Love opens us. It births within us new dreams; it enlivens the future and humanizes us to each other and even to ourselves.”¹⁰

In the pages that follow, I begin by repudiating the mythical accounting of the Pilgrims, naming how this imagination functions in my community and American Christian Nationalism more generally, asking people instead to reconceive of pilgrim as about being a person on

⁹ Here I am thinking of Lisa Tessman’s work about how the traditional philosophical virtues do not aid persons engaging in liberatory struggles in the context of oppression. She names that at times the virtues needed for survival and resistance run counter to that which we might name as necessary to a flourishing life. In fact, the virtues that enable one to survive oppression may actually extract a cost of their bearer. Similarly, in order to cultivate a self who can resist American Christian Nationalism, it demands a cost and risk of the self. Thus Jesus says to his followers that they are to pick up their crosses and follow him. In the deontological chapters I more explicitly turn to Bonhoeffer. See: Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Wilhelm Garbers, “On Being Christian.”

pilgrimage. I also detail a theology of the cross that invites persons to move into the wilderness and journey into the dark in order that they might know the promise and possibility of resurrection life, awakening to a world where we can be/become Christian and human with one another in the face of American Christian Nationalism.¹¹

Throughout my sermons, not only is a particular ethical vision at play as shaped by the above named and below explored theo-ethical imaginations, but the ethical grounding for this vision is also rooted in the dual Hebrew Bible/New Testament conceptions of God as *YHWH*/The I AM. In turning to God as *YHWH*, I counter Old Political Theology's notion of God as the Divine Law Giver and Sovereign. I instead invite the community to take up the task of self-formation to cultivate within them what I often call "a grown-up faith" where they can trust themselves to the encounter, knowing they will survive it.¹² If such a formation can be cultivated where one knows they can survive the encounter, even as they remain vulnerable in the midst of it, then American Christian Nationalism is robbed of its power to promise strong identities and safety. Instead, the formation of self discovered through the encounter, and journeying the way of the cross into life opens up the possibility of a way of being Christian in our time that can honor all of life and seek its flourishing in relationship with God, the self, and the neighbor.

¹¹ It is interesting to note how many of my sermons I've categorized as employing the individual teleological vision of self-formation. In 2018 this was 6 of the sermons, 11 out of total (55%). In 2019 this was 6 of the sermons, out of 13 total (46%). In 2020 1 of them, out of 16 total (6%). In 2021, 3 out of 7 thus far (43%). It is interesting to reflect upon why this is the case. In doing so, it seems to me that in the first two years there was a lot of space for me to focus on the individual formation, but 2020 brought with it both the COVID-19 pandemic, and then George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis...all during an election year in which the focus on communal becoming and being the church seemed especially important. Indeed, as will be made clear in subsequent chapters, the sermon series in the summer of 2020 was "Kingdom People," and the theme for the 2020-2021 programing year (September-May) was "Be the Church," during which we explored what it means to be church. All of this pressed toward more ethical reflection on the social/communal spheres. See: Appendix F.

¹² Here I reference the work of Judith Butler in *Giving an Account of Oneself* and her narration of risk and cost to the self in and through the encounter and recognition. Butler, *Giving an Account*.

YHWH: The I AM | Ground of Being | The One Who Brings Into Existence

Oh, if you keep reaching out
 Then I'll keep coming back
 And if you're gone for good
 Then I'm okay with that
 If you leave the light on
 Then I'll leave the light on
 And I am finding out
 There's just no other way
 That I'm still dancing at the end of the day
 If you leave the light on
 Then I'll leave the light on

—Maggie Rogers, "Light On"¹³

If the God at the center of American Christian Nationalism is the Divine Sovereign Father (who is also implicitly male, white, and all-powerful), then a conception of God that animates a self-formation that can counter the self wrought by these forces is *YHWH*, God as being itself, “the one who brings into existence whatever exists” or the “I am.”¹⁴ The reason for this, as I will make clear is that instead of God being a source of strong identity, the God discovered in *YHWH* is the one who holds us and makes possible the risk of existence—rendering us vulnerable and able to be open to others and the world.

God as *YHWH* is a dominant notion of God throughout the Hebrew Bible (John connects to Jesus to *YHWH* in his accounting of Jesus’ “I AM” statements) and is first introduced in

¹³ Maggie Rogers, “Light On,” track 5 on *Heard it in a Past Life*, Capital, 2019, compact disc (CD).

¹⁴ There are ranges of meaning for what is meant by *YHWH*. A dominant one is “(The One) Who Brings into Existence Whatever Exists” (Yahweh-Asher-Yahweh). See: Encyclopedia Britannica, “YHWH,” *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, 2020, accessed at: <https://academic-eb-com.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/levels/collegiate/article/Yahweh/77715>. For more on God as *YHWH*, see: Jürgen van Oorschot, and Markus Witte, *The Origins of Yahwism* (Berlin, Germany: De Gruyter, 2017); Shawn W. Flynn, *YHWH Is King: The Development of Divine Kingship in Ancient Israel* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2014); Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990); Haim Hillel Ben-Sasson and Michelle Bubis, *Understanding YHWH: The Name of God in Biblical, Rabbinic, and Medieval Jewish Thought* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

Exodus 3 when Moses encounters God in the burning bush. Moses queries, "Who should I say sent me?" God responds, "I AM that I AM." "I AM" is employed 300 times throughout the Bible, so much so that the biblical God is often called the "Great I AM."¹⁵

This lineage of God as *YHWH* finds its way into the New Testament Gospel of John. John makes a connection between Jesus and the biblical texts that had preceded Jesus as the Jewish people would know God as the I AM.¹⁶ Throughout the book of John there are seven "I AM" statements made by Jesus.¹⁷ By employing this linguistic pattern and attributing it to Jesus,

¹⁵ I preached on this passage on January 19, 2020. Sara Wilhelm Garbers, "The I AM," sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, January 19, 2020, <https://sarawg.com/2020/01/19/mlksunday/>. Note: The word "Lord" when spelled with capital letters stands for the divine name, *YHWH*, which is here connected with the verb *hayah*, "to be."

¹⁶ Ibid. In the sermon I noted the connection between Exodus 3 and John's depiction of Jesus' I AM statements: In the Greek translation of Exodus 3 (in the LXX), It says of God that God is the *ego eimi*, which is picked up later in John, where it talks about Jesus as the I AM. However, an interesting thing happens here in John 1:14 where Jesus is not yet referred to as the I AM (*ego eimi*), but as the *logos* (word) *egeneto* (become) flesh. What I would argue is that what's happening here is that Jesus is being positioned as both the new Moses, inviting people to the promised land of freedom, but also God (thus John 1 features so prominently in early arguments about Jesus' divinity). Jesus is also the I AM who shows up in the burning bush, who shows up with the people....

Here in John 1:14 where the word *becomes* flesh in Greek is *egeneto*. Some of you may be happy to know that the nerdy part of me got to spend some time hanging out with my Greek to English lexicon yesterday (and it was really fun!)...the rest of you are like, "That's nice, Sara." *Egeneto* shows up here in John 1:14 as an aorist verb, which means basically it is something that happened in the past, one time. So the word *become* flesh and this becoming in Greek and the range of meaning for it is means something like that which came into being through the process of birth, to be born, to be produced. So *egeneto* is talking about something like how God becomes human.

This verse itself was so important in the early church as they tried to make sense of who Jesus was...wrestling with questions like; "Is Jesus God?" Because what we're told here is that the Word (God, the I AM), **becomes**, takes on a new form and actually **becomes flesh** in our midst. The Greek-English lexicon talks about how this verb, *egeneto*, doesn't quite have the permanency of the verb *eimi* (the I AM), but it's a sense that what happens, I would argue, is that Jesus, as God who is the eternal *eimi* (*YHWH*) becomes (*egeneto*) flesh and then later, as we go down the passage to verse 18, where it is translated in the NRSV as "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." That Jesus is the Son *who is*...which has the same connection back to the verb *eimi*, thus the word *who egeneto* is the *ego eimi*...the I AM, in whom we live and move and have our being!

Though the insights are my own, a helpful resource on the above is Christopher W. Skinner's *Reading John*. See especially chapter 5. Christopher W. Skinner, *Reading John, Cascade Companions Series* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015).

¹⁷ They are: "I am the Bread of Life" (John 6:35); "I am the Light of the World" (John 8:12); "I am the Door" (John 10:9); "I am the Good Shepherd" (John 10:11,14); "I am the Resurrection and the Life" (John 11:25); "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life" (John 14:6); "I am the Vine" (John 15:1,5).

John is arguing that Jesus is God. In John 8, after naming that “I am the light of the world,” Jesus says, “Very truly I tell you before Abraham was, I AM.” (John 8:58) As Jesus says, “I AM the one who was sent, the one who was to come. I AM the light of the world. As you walk in that light, the truth will set you free.”

Paul Tillich excavates the notion of God as the I AM who is “the ground of being;” God is the one who holds and sustains the possibility of being, the one in whom we have breath and life. For Tillich, God is being itself. The assertion that God is being-itself is a true and non-symbolic statement whereas all other descriptions of God, other than being-itself, are symbolic and metaphorical and not literal.

Tillich explores this concept in his *Systematic Theology* and *Dynamics of Faith*, but even more importantly for me is his book *The Courage to Be*.¹⁸ Here, Tillich explores the intersection of courage and anxiety that people know regarding the meaning of their finite and vulnerable lives. Courage—the courage to be—is the ability to affirm one’s life and existence in the face of one’s finitude and non-being. It is “the ethical act in which man (*sic*) affirms his own being in spite of those elements of his existence which conflict with his essential self-affirmation.”¹⁹ Affirmation of one’s own being involves the acceptance of one’s finitude and inevitable nonbeing; the courage to be takes into itself the anxiety of death.

Tillich connects self-affirmation/courage in the face of non-being with love for others in the dialectic between individualization and participation where self-affirmation “is not the

¹⁸ See: Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Vol 1.: Reason and Revelation, Being and God* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951); *Dynamics of Faith* (1957; repr. edition, New York: Perennial, 2001). *The Courage to Be*, reprint ed. (1952; repr., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

¹⁹ Tillich, *Courage to Be*, 3.

courage to be as oneself, but the courage to be as a part.”²⁰ Through the mystical experience or the encounter with the power of being one discovers courage, for in accepting love through faith one knows “the state of being grasped by the power of being-itself.”²¹ And through embrace of suffering and doubt, one encounters God-beyond-God, where the “courage to be” sustains one in the face of the fundamental anxiety of non-being. Here one learns: “The courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt.”²²

Thus, in conceptualizing God through the evocative imaginations of God as YHWH, the I AM, following in the tradition of Paul Tillich’s naming of God as “the ground of being,” I seek to animate the Winnicottian possibility for a space that can serve to support and hold people in the anxiety that self-formation through encounter causes. The call for people to do this work can, indeed, incite deep levels of existential, psychological, and spiritual anxiety. The antidote to this is a safe holding space that can be discovered in the God who is the ground of being. Hence, if one is to confront the machinations of American Christian Nationalism, particularly in one’s self—especially where this self has been formed by strong God-metaphors (e.g.- God as “mighty fortress” or “warrior-king”)—then God as the “ground of being” and the “holding space” provides a positive pathway forward in enabling the psyche and ego to actually open up and do the necessary and vulnerable work of discovering an identify known through much more liminal and tentative (and vitally necessary) means. *YHWH* provides enough of a secure attachment base

²⁰ Ibid., 89.

²¹ Ibid., 172.

²² Ibid., 190.

for people to then explore and feel safe in doing their inner work in order that they might become more human.

As I preached in my sermon on our church's core value of "Wrestle with the Tensions in God's Word and World," God is not meant to be a fortress to keep us safe from dangerous outsiders, but the one who enables us to move freely in love and openness to the world.²³

Some of you know the work of Luther (we are getting close to Reformation Sunday though it's not here yet!). I wanted to say a couple of things about him as it relates to Acts 10 and wrestling. Luther was a man who wrestled with God throughout his life in profound ways. Because of his wrestling, he ended up being a part of the transformation of the church that allows us to be sitting here today. He nailed his 95 theses to the door in Wittenberg in 1517. He disputed and wrote prolifically and wrestled, continuing to seek to understand God. In 1520 he wrote his famous "Freedom of the Christian."²⁴ In 1528 he wrote a hymn that many of you know "A Mighty Fortress is our God."²⁵

Here's the deal about Martin Luther's life: after he had posted his 95 theses his life began to be under threat. Like literally, the Pope wanted him dead, and a lot of people wanted to kill him. I can't even imagine living under the threat of such acute stress and terror like he was experiencing. But by the time Martin Luther gets near the end of his life in 1543, he ends up penning a piece which has gone down in infamy because of its horror. It's entitled "On the Jews and Their Lies." This 65,000-word anti-Semitic treatise was picked up by persons who sought to expunge Jewish people from Europe multiple times throughout the 16th-20th centuries...a history leading to the rise of National Socialism in Germany.²⁶

²³ As I said in this sermon: "God is not a fortress who keeps us safe from the world. God is the Spirit who breathes in us and invites us to be a part of God's vision for the world...To be a people who embody the handiwork of the love of God to all living things who God has named clean." Sara Wilhelm Garbers, "Wrestle with the Tensions," sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, October 14, 2018, <https://sarawg.com/2018/10/17/wrestle-with-the-tensions/>.

²⁴ Martin Luther, "Freedom of the Christian," in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. by John Dillenberger, 42-85 (New York: Anchor Books, 1962).

²⁵ Martin Luther, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," Hymn (c. 1569). The lyrics of the first stanza: "A mighty fortress is our God, A bulwark never failing: Our helper He, amid the flood | Of mortal ills prevailing. For still our ancient foe | Doth seek to work his woe; His craft and power are great, And armed with cruel hate, On earth is not his equal."

²⁶ Martin Luther, "On the Jews and their Lies," 1543, *Luther's Werke*, trans. and ed. by Martin H. Bertram (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 47:268-271. For more on this, see: Jarrett A. Carty, "Martin Luther's Anti-Judaism and Its Political Significance," *Antisemitism Studies* 3, no. 2 (2019): 317-342; Mark Thompson, "Luther and the Jews," *Reformed Theological Review* 67, no. 3 (2008): 121-145; Michael A. Mullett, "Luther's Later Years," in *Martin Luther*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), 314-350.

If I were to wonder and guess a little bit, I would say that because of Luther's own fear of his death and how he was under attack, he began to get locked in his thinking and openness to the world. He forgot that God was a refuge of safety, desiring to heal us, so that we can engage the world, but instead Luther began to lock in and get more afraid of the world, forgetting that God isn't a fortress to keep us safe from the world, but the safety that allows us to engage the world from a place of love and safety we know because of faith.²⁷

Conceiving of God as *YHWH* and the ground of being is one of my central God concepts that runs throughout my sermons and animates my invitation to people to become Christian and follow the God who is and was. As I preached in my June 30, 2019 sermon on John 8 entitled "I AM the Light of the World," it is normal to fear self-protection and the exposure by the light, yet the invitation of the Christian life, and the necessary journey of becoming to which I am inviting the congregation, is one which asks this of us.

It's normal human psychology and desire for ego protection to want to hide those (vulnerable, broken) parts, to want to stay safe. It's normal to be afraid of the light. But here's the thing...this news...that Jesus is the light... it's actually good news. And here, in John the I AM of Jesus is connected to the verb in Greek from which we get the English word "ego." Jesus is the I AM, the one whose light, in what it exposes, opens up a space for us to not have to live in self-protection, to not have to try to fend off from each other what we're so sure might destroy us if the light came in. Because if God really is the I AM who holds us and sustains us...if the light of truth is the light of the gospel of grace, then nothing which is exposed cannot be healed and taken up. Walking into the light can sometimes be painful, but it is always the truest moment of life and life everlasting. The exposure of the light is the way to true life where we refuse ego protection and find ourselves held and sustained by the fire of the GREAT I AM whose light and life doesn't burn up the bush or destroy it, but calls us to take off our shoes and walk on this sacred ground (Ex. 3).²⁸

Over the past years, my understanding of *YHWH* as the ground of being/holding space for self-formation as shaped by Winnicott and Tillich has shifted to a more decidedly feminist

²⁷ Wilhelm Garbers, "Wrestle with the Tensions."

²⁸ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, "I AM the Light of the World," sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, June 30, 2019, <https://sarawg.com/2019/06/30/i-am-the-light-of-the-world-a-sermon-on-john-812-20/>.

interpretation in the vein of *YHWH* as “the one who brings into existence whatever exists.”²⁹

This language has opened to me more gestational and birthing imagery implicit in the notion of God as *YHWH*. And what could be further from the notion of God as the Divine Sovereign Father than God as the birthing, gestating one who fosters our emergence into the world?³⁰

Strangely, faith itself can be employed as its own sort of defense, a type of self-preservation designed to keep us safe. And we then lash out of our defenses, but with the shield of God as a sure defense as we think: "If I just attach myself to this God who will then, then that God will smite you." ‘Cuz violence is justified if God does it on my behalf, right?

That's one of the ways we can also approach our faith. Faith is the thing that gives us meaning and strength that we believe will prop up our ego and keep us from ever being harmed. And we in the history of the Christian Church have seen some of the legacy and influence of when faith gets employed that way: it leads to genocide, crusades, and religious-based violence. But I'd like to suggest today that there is another way.

The other way of faith, which John again and again invites us into, is one that does not make us strong, but one that, through the encounter and the knowing of the Great I AM, births us into new ways of being. This is the way of love, of a love that heals and binds up our wounds, of a Spirit who breathes within our souls and our hearts, inviting us to be the humans that God has fashioned and created and called us each to be.

This is the invitation to the way of faith that John is depicting here. An invitation to encounter and be encountered by the love of the Great I AM, who was, and is, and is to come...to be birthed anew by the one who is our source of life, breath, and all things...if only we can remember and allow ourselves to be encountered and held by this God.”³¹

God as the I AM who met Moses in the burning bush will be with us and will sustain us

whatever happens, not because God is our strong fortress, but because God is the ground of

²⁹ From: Encyclopedia Britannica, “*YHWH*.”

³⁰ Moses’ mom’s name is connected to the name *YHWH* (Yokheved), likewise, in I John, following the *YHWH* tradition and applying it to Jesus, names God through the Greek verb γεννάω, meaning “to bear” or “to give birth.” *YHWH* is the one who midwives and delivers Israel from Egypt, taking them from the land that is “the narrow place” to “the land flowing with milk and honey.” All of this is birthing/gestating/midwifing imagery. For the entry on the verb *gennaō*, see: Bill Mounce, “γεννάω,” *Greek Dictionary*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.billmounce.com/greek-dictionary/gennaō>.

³¹ “And Jesus Said: “I am the Vine.” Sara Wilhelm Garbers, “I AM the True Vine,” sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, August 11, 2019, <https://sarawg.com/2019/08/11/truevine/>.

being, the one who bears and midwives us into freedom, in order that we might be and become Christian and human in the face of American Christian Nationalism.

Not Pilgrims, but A Person on Pilgrimage

You have looked
at so many doors
with longing,
wondering if your life
lay on the other side.

For today,
choose the door
that opens
to the inside.

Travel the most ancient way
of all:
the path that leads you
to the center
of your life.

No map
but the one
you make yourself.

No provision
but what you already carry
and the grace that comes
to those who walk
the pilgrim's way.

—Jan Richardson, “The Map You Make Yourself”³²

A central imagination of American Christian Nationalism, as recounted in chapter one, is the mythology surrounding the founding of our nation by the Pilgrims.³³ This story is one in

³² Jan Richardson, “The Map You Make Yourself,” from *Women’s Christmas Retreat* (2013), accessed June 1, 2022, <https://sanctuaryofwomen.com/blog/womens-christmas-the-map-you-make-yourself/>.

³³ For more on the Pilgrims, whose history has uniquely shaped the imagination of our congregation as a “Pilgrim People” see: Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*; Bunker, *Making Haste from Babylon*; Philbrick, *Mayflower*.

which a group of white settlers who were a religious minority in England came to the United States so that they might freely worship. Thus, they established the Massachusetts Bay Colony in order that they might form a Christian civilization that would serve as a “City on a Hill.” While it is true that the Pilgrims came over to what is now the United States for religious freedom, the narration of this history inside of American Christian Nationalist ideology is one which whitewashes the complicated and problematic aspects of this history: including ignoring the treatment of native persons, religious minorities, and women. Instead, the Pilgrims are the heroes of the story and America is understood in its founding to solely be an attempt at creating a Christian Utopia.³⁴

As has already been noted, the reverence for the Pilgrims was popularized at my church by the second and most influential senior minister, Arthur Rouner. A son of an east-coast congregational minister, Arthur was captured by a mythological view of the earliest Puritan colonists and employed his passion for this story to give meaning and identity to the congregation, calling them to be a “A Pilgrim People.”³⁵ The power of this naming and legacy has persisted and up until this past year the congregation has (problematically) hosted a Thanksgiving Day service where we employ the original Puritan order of service and a family dresses up as Pilgrims.³⁶

³⁴As Bendorth makes clear in her book makes clear in her book, *The Last Puritans: Mainline Protestants and the Power of the Past*, it is only in the 1930s and 40s during heightened xenophobia and racialized patriotism that the myth of the Pilgrims and the wedding of Christianity and Americanism become dominant accounts of our national history. See: Bendorth, *The Last Puritans*, 133-152.

³⁵ As I noted in the first chapter, his embrace of this mythology of the Puritans was not his imagination alone, but there was a rise in the embrace of this mythologized vision of the founding of the Americas by these religious dissidents and the Pilgrim celebrations of Thanksgiving services came into cultural dominance in the mid 20th century as a part of an uptick in Christian nationalism fervor post-WWII.

³⁶ When I was hired at the church, I was told by the then senior minister that the service would be ending in the next year or two. I told him that I would not participate in the service and have thus far done so by stating simply that my

I have long been concerned by this fetishization of the early Pilgrims and the ways in which it emboldens a non-self-critical whiteness that refuses owning the complexity of Puritan history and tradition which is complicit in the genocide of Native persons. Thus, I have sought to reframe the notion of what it means to be a “Pilgrim People.” I do by inviting people to move from the idea of being a Pilgrim to being *one who is on a spiritual pilgrimage*.

The invitation to spiritual pilgrimage is found in many religious traditions including Christianity, and affords a more open landscape for conceptualizing the self as one who is committed to the continued journey of life and faith. This way of being is vital to becoming the types of selves who can engage in ethical self-formation that allows for being and becoming Christian in the face of American Christian Nationalism.

Nowhere is this intervention more evident than in one of my earliest sermons in the community entitled “People on Pilgrimage.”³⁷ I preached the sermon during Lent of 2018. It was my first Lent on staff at the church. In employing the image of the “pilgrim,” I was inviting members to move more deeply into their own story, self-examination, and reflection: to journey inward. It is also significant that this sermon was given during Lent, the time when the Christian Church journeys the way of Jesus as he turns toward Jerusalem and his death.³⁸

sex would not be allowed to lead worship and since those who value the service being like it originally was, my participation in it would not be allowed. Now that our name has changed, we will discontinue this practice this year and, hopefully, instead will engage in a service of repentance for our being complicit in harm against our native siblings.

³⁷ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, “People on Pilgrimage,” sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, March 11, 2018, <https://sarawg.com/2018/03/11/people-on-pilgrimage-a-sermon-on-psalm-30/>.

³⁸ I have kept bringing this notion of the pilgrimage of the Lenten journey to the fore throughout each Lenten journey every year since I have been at the church.

That day I hung a quilt that one of the members had made of an angel who wore a pilgrim's coat from the front of the pulpit.³⁹ In featuring this image, I pressed people to reconsider the meaning of "pilgrim" to be that of a person on a journey of self-transformation. Even as I reframed the notion of being a pilgrim, I did so by turning to the work of former Colonial Church minister, Bob Guelich, and long-time member and spiritual director, Janet Hagberg, in their book *The Critical Journey*.⁴⁰ I named that we are called to be people who are

³⁹ The handout first explained the pilgrim's coat quilt and then provided reflection questions on the back. About the Pilgrim Coat, it read:

Most religions of the world encourage pilgrimages, intentional trips to sacred sites like the Holy Land, Jerusalem, Paul's missionary voyages, Mecca, shrines, monasteries, temples, sacred rivers, roads, ceremonial or healing sites. The Japanese have a religious tradition of traveling from one temple to another over difficult mountainous terrain. The pilgrims wear short cloth coats called Pilgrim Coats, with a personal theme inscribed on them. Each temple is a stopping point where they receive an imprint of that temple's seal or stamp on their coat.

Textile artist, Janet Hagberg, reflected on this Japanese tradition and decided to apply it to her own faith tradition by making a personal Pilgrim Coat, representing her long and meandering journey toward God and wholeness.

She adapted a coat design from Carolyn Myss and constructed a wall hanging depicting her theme "O Love that will not let me go." Then she chose her equivalent of temple stamps by considering multiple turning points in her life and printing them discretely on the hem of her coat. Once she finished the design, she asked friends to help her hand quilt the wall hanging. While they sewed, they shared a turning point in their own lives. These stories became additional holy moments of the Pilgrim Coat process. Now you are invited to take your own Pilgrim Coat journey.

After the service, people were invited to make their own mini-Pilgrim quilt. After completing the project (or on their own if they chose to forgo the craft) they were encouraged to ponder the below Reflection Questions written by Tracy Mooty. These included:

- What is it like for you to think of your life as a sacred journey or pilgrimage?
- How do you envision the symbolic pilgrim coat you've worn throughout your life? How does it reflect the many turning point stories and messages that have served to guide and inspire you?
- What is one turning point story you'd like to explore this morning?
- How might you describe this turning point experience with words in a brief paragraph? What title best summarizes what you learned? What were the circumstances from which this wisdom emerged?
- How might you capture this turning point experience with images and symbols in a drawing? What lines, shapes, colors, and textures best express all you learned?
- What changed in you or for you as a result of this turning point experience?
- How did God meet you in this experience? Where did you sense God's presence, provision, power?

⁴⁰ Janet Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith* (Salem, WI: Sheffield Publishing, 1995). Their book was important for me during seminary and deeply influenced my conception of the teleological individual ethics that shape my pastoral ministry, namely, that it is through engagement with the places we are sure will kill us, that we access deeper and truer life. Their book follows other spiritual development models, based in developmental psychology. They argue that the life of faith has its own developmental and personal tasks.

on pilgrimage, engaging a journey that can bring challenge, pain, and struggle (as opposed to one protected by the promises of power and privilege implicit in American Christian Nationalism).

This life is a journey. It is a pilgrimage. Like those who have gone on spiritual quests and journeys throughout the centuries, we too are on journey. Some days, those journeys will be filled with profound vistas, and some days, it will be like a 15-mile slog through the mud where we're barely crawling, but it is my hope and prayer that God would give us the grace and the courage to not turn away from the hard places, but to wonder and open ourselves to this transformative love of Christ, to be people on pilgrimage with the God of love whose love has always been ours.⁴¹

This invitation to journey not the way of the Pilgrims, but of the vulnerability of one who is on pilgrimage seeks to open up space to reframe who we are and how we might move from strong and violent identities to ones marked by the risk of being and becoming human as we are formed by the way of Jesus. As we closed that service, we extended to them a blessing.

May our gracious God give you eyes to see
the course of your life as sacred;
to know in the depths of your being
that the many sunlit paths
and even the shadowy detours have
mattered greatly as they served to
form the very essence of who you are.

May you take heart as you invite
each journey marker
to take shape in your memory;
each learning, wounding, softening,
healing, breaking, strengthening
claim them as precious and holy,
as the very fabric of your pilgrim coat.

May this coat, your coat,
woven together by the threads of
your God graced, love-filled story

At some point in that journey, one encounters a “wall” of sorts—a grief, suffering, or loss so great that there is no way to get through it without having to turn toward it.

⁴¹ Wilhelm Garbers, “People on Pilgrimage.”

stir you to thank and praise the One who
 through it all
 warms, protects, sustains and
 leads you home. Amen.

—Tracy Mooty, “The Pilgrim’s Blessing”⁴²

The Way of the Cross: The Wilderness and Going into the Dark

Mmm, are you in or are you out?
 Leave your things behind
 'Cause it's all going off without you
 Excuse me, too busy
 You're writing your tragedy
 These mishaps you bubble wrap
 When you've no idea what you're like
 So let go, so let go, hmm, jump in
 Oh, well, whatcha waiting for? It's alright
 'Cause there's beauty in the breakdown

—Frou Frou, “Let Go”⁴³

If the last section was focused on disrupting the notion of what it means to be a pilgrim, here I constructively trace the imagery from the Bible that supports Christian formation capable of resisting American Christian Nationalism. These are all following what Martin Luther named “theolo(gies) of cross” as opposed to “theolog(ies) of glory,” discovered through what I alternatively explore as the invitation to the wilderness and going into the dark in order that we might discover resurrection life (as detailed in the next section).⁴⁴

⁴² Tracy Mooty, “The Pilgrim’s Blessing,” Unpublished poem. Shared as the closing prayer on March 11, 2018.

⁴³ Frou Frou, “Let Go,” track 1 on *Details*, MCA, 2002, compact disc (CD).

⁴⁴ The notion of a theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) was first articulated by Martin Luther in his Heidelberg Disputation (see: Martin Luther, “Heidelberg Disputation (1518),” in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman, vol 31(Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 40. See also 52–53 for Luther’s commentary on his position). In it he distinguishes between the “theology of the cross” (*theologia crucis*) and a “theology of glory” (*theologia gloriae*). For Luther, theologies of glory focus on the invisible nature of God, whereas theologies of the cross focus on how God is revealed in Jesus Christ. To Luther, the *theologia crucis*, is the method for doing all true theology. As he writes: the one who “deserves to be called a theologian (is the one) who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross. A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil.

Through each of these I am reaching for conceptions and language that can help to animate the way of the cross in a world that has come of age. Having been raised inside of white Evangelicalism where resurrection and the way of the cross was a "theology of glory," where faith made us "more than conquerors," I had come to a point where this theology of the glory no longer worked for me as it fostered white supremacy and "spiritual bypassing."⁴⁵ The way I came back to the cross and a deepened/renewed "theology of the cross," was through Black Liberation Theologian James Cone, particularly in his book *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*.⁴⁶ The first time I publicly articulated my current apprehension of the cross was on my first Maundy Thursday Sermon when I was on staff at the church:

This is why, when I think about the cross, I'm reminded of a powerful text by a black theologian here in America, named James Cone. It's called *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. In the book Cone makes connections between the cross and what it meant in Rome, and what the lynching tree meant in a particularly dark period in our own history of this

A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is." (Ibid, 40: theses 20 and 21). As a Lutheran minister and theologian, Bonhoeffer is deeply shaped by a theology of the cross even (as I noted in Chapter 1), his conception of what it is and asks of us evolves throughout his life. In his "Lectures on Christology," Bonhoeffer notes: "We can have the Exalted One only as the Crucified One. The resurrection of Christ does not get us around the stumbling block. Even the Risen One remains the stumbling block for us. If it were not so, he would not be for us." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Lectures on Christology," in *Berlin 1932-33*, vol. 12, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, ed. Larry L. Rasmussen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009): 180). This theology of the cross sits at the center of Bonhoeffer's conception of the call to formation/discipleship of the Christian person...one who is called to simple obedience and living the way of the cross. See: Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*. For more on Luther's Theology of the cross see: Gerhard Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997). Walter von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1976).

⁴⁵ This term was introduced in the early 1980s by John Welwood. It references the ways that spirituality can be employed to "avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished tasks." See: Philip B. Clarke, et al., "The Straight Path to Healing: Using Motivational Interviewing to Address Spiritual Bypass," *Journal of Counseling & Development* 91, no. 1 (2013): 87-94. As they note: "Spiritual bypass is a phenomenon that commonly arises when working with clients regarding the spiritual dimension. Spiritual bypass is defined as the use of one's spirituality, spiritual beliefs, spiritual practices, and spiritual life to avoid experiencing the emotional pain of working through psychological issues. This trap entails actively seeking spiritual highs as a means to avoid processing underlying psychological pain. One way to address the issue of spiritual bypass in counseling is to use the techniques, interventions, and processes of motivational interviewing (MI). MI is a counseling framework used to encourage positive behavior change in clients (Miller, 1983)." Ibid., 88. See also: Robert Augustus Masters, *Spiritual Bypassing: When Spirituality Disconnects us from What Really Matters* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2010).

⁴⁶ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.

country after the civil war as blacks were lynched and ruled by Jim Crow laws and segregation. Yet the distance between these two symbols of cross and lynching tree isn't so far, Cone argues. Both are an instrument of the empire to say, "Remember, we have the power. We can steal your life. We can destroy it." And even though God was crucified, it's in this way that God demonstrates back to the powers of this world, "You thought you won. You thought that you could silence and kill. You thought the war horse would win. But indeed, it's the donkey that's winning. Indeed I have so loved you that I am in solidarity with you even to death on a cross."

But what foolishness is this? A cross. A lynching tree. Could salvation come to us from these places? And yet this has been part of our story. It's a story of a God who took on human form, who came and walked amongst us, who overcame the world...not through power or strength, but by Spirit.

The Easter story is of a God who said a profound, "Yes!" in the face of the instruments of death that were meant to say, "No."

A God who is in foolishness ended up becoming the savior of the entire world.⁴⁷

Journey into the Wilderness

We saw birth and death
 Can't we be still
 What makes you kind
 From where comes your sparkling mind?

Do not be afraid.
 Do not be afraid.

What's that I see?
 I think it's the wild
 Puts the fear of God in me.

—Mumford & Sons, "The Wild"⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, "The Foolishness of the Cross," given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, March 29, 2018, <https://sarawg.com/2018/03/29/the-foolishness-of-the-cross-a-maundy-thursday-sermon-on-i-corinthians-118-31-with-jeff-lindsay/>.

⁴⁸ Mumford & Sons, "The Wild," track 5 on *Delta*, Gentlemen of the Road, 2018, compact disc (CD). Of this I preached: "Last year as Andy and I were miscarrying, I listened to a song on repeat from the latest album by Mumford & Sons. The song was called 'The Wild.' And as painful and excruciating as it was (and is) to know that I wasn't going to get to parent that child on the earth, there was a sense of love that washed over me as I listened and wept, knowing that what I was experiencing and encountering in my grief was the wildness of life and the God who held and sustained me...and that there was more life for me to encounter, if I would just let myself be held." Sara Wilhelm Garbers, "New Land," a sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, June 2, 2019, <https://sarawg.com/2019/06/02/new-land-a-sermon-on-joshua-11-11/>.

The task of self-formation involves journeying the way of the cross. Another way to think of this is that the task of self-formation asks one to enter the wilderness. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, and writings and lives of the early church mothers and fathers, the wilderness is a place of profound spiritual transformation and encounter with God.⁴⁹ Especially significant to this project is the way that when Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire, at the same time many Christians fled to the desert in order to rediscover and refine in their faith. Likewise, we too must go to the wilderness anew (though I would argue this should be temporary retreat like that of Jesus in order that we might re-engage the world) if we are to resist the dominant expressions of Christian faith as it is baptized by American Christian Nationalism.⁵⁰

Though the wilderness features throughout my sermons, the first time I directly preached on this notion was during Lent of 2021. Our theme was “The Great Turning,” exploring the ways in which the presence of God in Jesus is a call that turns everything upside down. This sermon

⁴⁹ For more on the wilderness in the Bible see: Brian C. Jones, “Wilderness,” in vol 5, *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2009), 848–52. Robert Barry Leal, *Wilderness in the Bible: Toward a Theology of Wilderness* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004). Ulrich W. Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness: The Wilderness Theme in the Second Gospel and Its Basis in the Biblical Tradition, Studies in Biblical Theology* (London, UK: SCM, 1963). David W. Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 130* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2000). Augustine Stock, *The Way in the Wilderness: Exodus, Wilderness, and Moses Themes in Old Testament and New* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1969). Lynne Wall, “Finding Identity in the Wilderness,” in *Wilderness: Essays in Honour of Frances Young*, ed. by R. S. Sugirtharajah, vol. 295 *The Library of New Testament Studies* (London, UK: T & T Clark International, 2005), 66–77. Sun Wook Kim, “The Wilderness as a Place of the New Exodus in Mark's Feeding Miracles (Mark 6:31–44 and 8:1–10),” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 48, no. 2 (2018): 62–75. Malcolm Clemens Young, *The Invisible Hand in the Wilderness: Economics, Ecology, and God* (Atlanta, GA: Mercer University Press: 2014).

⁵⁰ For more on the desert mothers and fathers, see: Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New York: New Directions, 1960). Benedicta Ward, trans. *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks* (New York: Penguin, 2003). Philip Bochanski, *Wisdom of the Desert Fathers and Mothers: Ancient Advice for the Modern World* (Gastonia, NC: TAN Books, 2019). Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1981).

was based upon Luke 4:1-12 where Jesus, as the new Moses and new Israel, goes to the wilderness, is tempted, and is found faithful. Of the wilderness I said:

I love the wild, but it also terrifies me. It terrifies me because when I'm in it I am reminded of the grandeur of God and that I am not larger than any mountain. I am not larger than any mountain. And is precisely this that terrifies me. I've spent a lifetime ensuring my psychological and bodily safety, I seek control and mastery so as to not feel vulnerable. But there's nothing like the wild to expose how foolish a notion it is that we have control over most things.⁵¹

“I love the wild and it terrifies me.”⁵² In naming this, I knew that not only was I not alone, but I was seeking to help the congregants open *themselves* to their experiences in the wild and the ways in which our lives and formation as city people has largely taught us to build lives where we believe we can control our environments, naming how this shows up in our spirituality as well.

In addition to the wilderness as a spiritual and psychological space, I also employ it at various moments in order to invite us toward the actual land and wild in our time. I do so because I think that nature, if related to with humility and wonder, can aid us in the quest to become human as we recognize our need of it.

In her book, *The Hour of Land*, eco-feminist activist and writer Terry Tempest Williams writes about our National Parks and notes that we fear the wild and the wilderness seek to control it. She writes:

In the desert, success is the understanding of limits. One false move and you die. You can't talk your way out of thirst. Bare skin burns. Face-to-face with a spitting rattlesnake, the only thing you have to negotiate is your escape. There are rules in the desert. Pay attention. Adapt or perish.⁵³

To fear the wild and seek to control it is not the pathway of life. No, rather the pathway of life is to go deeper in. Perhaps this is why so often throughout the Scriptures,

⁵¹ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, "Turning to the Wilderness," sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, February 28, 2021, <https://sarawg.com/2021/02/28/turning-to-the-wilderness-a-sermon-on-luke-41-10/>.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Terry Tempest Williams, *The Hour of Land* (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2016), 197.

the place where people go for renewal and to be encountered by God is to the wilderness... to the desert. For there everything is stripped bare and our human pretensions of power, they dissolve as we are exposed...not to kill us, but because there is beauty in the exposure, which opens us up to be a people who are transformed, a people who encounter the God of the wild so that we might truly live.⁵⁴

The Lenten journey in most Protestant faith traditions begins with the passage from Luke 4 where Jesus goes into the wilderness and for 40 days and 40 nights is tempted right before he begins his public ministry. In order to frame up why this theme of the wilderness is significant for the Christian spiritual life, I went back to Genesis.

The wilderness is present at the beginning: In the beginning God's Spirit hovers over the chaos/the wild. And it is into this space that the breath of God speaks, forming life out of chaos, making possible new things. It is a wilderness to which God invites Abram, as Abram becomes the father of a new people; it is only on account of his willingness to leave behind the comforts he had known that he finds a new place. It is to the wilderness that Hagar flees and discovers the God who sees her (El Roi), the God who indeed makes her and her people a great nation. It is to the wilderness that the people of Israel go after they emerge from slavery...and for 40 years they journey through this wilderness until they reach the promised land.

It is to the wilderness that in Luke, as he accounts right before our passage for today, we discover John the Baptist, who has called the people to come out from the cities to be baptized...as Jesus is. The wilderness is indeed a place where God shows up and meets people. It is a place where the things that we had relied on before are stripped away and where new life is possible.⁵⁵

An embrace of a wilderness theology and the sense that the wilderness journey is necessary for becoming Christian has long been a part of my vision for the formation of the self...and has been true of my personal experience as well. I name this throughout my sermons as I recount my own journey into the wilderness, norming up disorientation and the importance of such liminality and

⁵⁴ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, "A New Heavens and a New Earth," sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, August 28, 2020, <https://sarawg.com/2020/08/23/a-new-heavens-a-new-earth-a-sermon-on-revelation-211-8/>.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

vulnerability for growth and transformation. I highlight the intersection of the wilderness journey with my own story:

In a recent study of the book of Exodus that I did with Stephanie Spencer of 40 Orchards, she suggested that part of the reason that the people of Israel didn't go directly from Egypt to the Promised Land (because that journey shouldn't have taken them 40 years) was because they needed time to unlearn the 400 years of formation they'd endured as slaves...they needed time to imagine new possibilities for who God was calling them to be.⁵⁶ Inside of neurological science and psychology we've discovered that our brains develop neurological pathways, well-trod roads of normative behavior and responses we have learned throughout our lives. Though our brains have profound capacity for neuroplasticity (the changing of our minds and making new pathways), it takes time to change the patterns and the pathways that we have grown accustomed to. Indeed, for me, the kid who was afraid of dogs, it took some time and deep breathing to not think little poodles were going to eat me... but now I know better. In fact, I'm now the proud parent of a double doodle.

It takes time to help our brains and our bodies believe in other worlds and possibilities than those we have known. So imagine if you will, that for generations, your people have been enslaved in Egypt. The next day, you're supposed to just wake up and magically be like, "Nah, I'm not going to go build a pyramid anymore, I guess might as well go worship *YHWH* and see what might happen." No, it's going to take some time to unlearn the ways that you had been formed and to become a new self. Thus, it is in the wilderness where God shows up and reminds them that God is the one who feeds them. God is the one who makes new life possible. And likewise, God changes us, if only we will go to the wilderness.

I know that in my own life, some of my most sacred and transformative experiences have been in the wild and in the wilderness, places where I have reached the edges of myself and of the places that I couldn't control. Here I discovered that there was more life and more possibility and more wonder to be had than that which I knew in the safety of my home.

Maybe there's a reason that there's so much wilderness in the Bible. Maybe God knows something about the wilderness and what it births in us.⁵⁷

Central to my teleological approach to self-formation is a belief that as we move into the wilderness, the good life (the teleological vision for our individual formation) is discovered. For through our willingness to go to the places of our own stories and our lives that are rife with

⁵⁶ For more on the work of Stephanie Spencer and 40 Orchards, see: <https://40orchards.org>.

⁵⁷ Wilhelm Garbers, "People on Pilgrimage."

terror we discover life. It is in the wilderness of the inner self that we, like the people of Israel, discover and remember our dependence on God and are formed to be a people who care for the widow, the sojourner, and the orphan. As I noted in the sermon:

And when we forget, because we always will forget, we're invited again to the wild, into the wilderness. And every year in Lent, we have that same invitation because we're going to forget. So let's go back to the wild. Let's go back to the wilderness. And in that space, might we discover and recover and remember that we were meant to live in this land...

Yes, going to the wilderness, turning our faces toward it is, can be, and indeed will be terrifying. But we go there together. We are invited to turn from the places that we think will keep us safe and to emerge as a resurrection people who have gone into the wilderness and discovered that we do not live on bread alone, but by the love of God.

God is, and God will continue to invite us to new things until the day that we die. And we can either live our lives constructing edifices to keep us safe, making us think that the wild will never get us...or we can take up the risk and the invitation to turn toward the wild, to journey into the wilderness a little bit more. For in so doing, we will discover life, discover freedom, discover the power of the rushing wind through the trees, the whisper of promise on the morn, the way that the birds sparkle and sing, the way that the waves of Lake Superior beckon and call, the way of life.

Let us turn to the wilderness. Let us turn to Jesus. Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid.⁵⁸

Going into the Dark

Go slowly.

Consent to it, but don't wallow in it.

Know it as a place of germination and growth.

Remember the light, take an outstretched hand if you find one.

Exercise unused senses, find the path by walking it.

Practice trust.

Watch for dawn.

—Marilyn McEntyre, “What to Do in Darkness”⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Wilhelm Garbers. “Turning to the Wilderness.”

⁵⁹ Marilyn McEntyre, “What to do in Darkness,” *Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life* (March 2004), <http://www.ayearofbeinghere.com/2013/12/marilyn-mcentyre-what-to-do-in-darkness.html>.

Another way to think about the wilderness and the way of the cross is to turn to the tomb and the darkness that follows Jesus' crucifixion. Here, I deepen the formational imagery from being a place of vulnerability to a place where we risk the terror and ourselves in order that we might not live in fear. Appropriately, the clearest example of my naming that we must go into the dark is my Maundy Thursday sermon from April 18, 2019 entitled "Into Your Hands,"⁶⁰ where I recount my journey from Summer 2018 through Winter 2019. It was a complicated, painful, and stretching year for me. I include a substantive excerpt from this sermon because it is one of the best models of my work as a feminist preacher: I do not merely proclaim or cast vision, but embody it, making clear how self-formation is at play in my life and modeling its importance for the congregation as well.

I am convinced that it is only by embracing the dark and terror of the things that we fear that we can become selves who are able to refuse the machinations of American Christian Nationalism which tells us that the good news is that we can have power, instead of supporting us in facing our fears and discovering life through honesty, suffering, and self-healing.⁶¹

We all have these places of fear. In this moment, we are interrupted with some good news where God in Christ, in the face of the ultimate terror says, "Into your hands," we too open our hands and are likewise invited to answer the question. Will we likewise open

⁶⁰ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, "Into Your Hands," sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, April 18, 2019, <https://sarawg.com/2019/04/18/into-your-hands-a-maundy-thursday-sermon-on-luke-2344-49/>. In many ways this is more of a Good Friday sermon, but our church didn't have a Good Friday service at the time so Maundy Thursday bridged the two days theologically. Here I was focused on the themes of going into the dark, the fear and the terror of that journey.

⁶¹ I preached this sermon in the middle of our senior minister's wife's journey toward her own death. She had been diagnosed in late January with stage 4 pancreas cancer and died Easter morning. I had gone to their home just hours before I preached and had given Dawn her last communion. While working on the sermon, and before I went to visit them, I listened to "Head Above Water," by Arvil Lavigne where she recounts her journey with severe Lyme's disease. Arvil Lavigne, "Head Above Water," track 1 on *Head Above Water*, BGM Music, 2019, compact disc (cd). Her prayer (noted in the lyrics): "So pull me up from down below | 'Cause I'm underneath the undertow | Come dry me off and hold me close | I need you now, I need you most | God, keep my head above water | Don't let me drown, it gets harder."

our hands and trust of the goodness of God and God's love because here's the thing: during Lent, and particularly during Holy Week, we affirm the of death and resurrection as a part of our faith. So it shouldn't surprise us, that this is the part of the story that Jesus—in the face of death—says, "Into your hands I commit my Spirit."

Right, so this story, that life comes from death, is central to the Christian message. We know that it's human. We've lived this: live out of death in our own lives. And yet we're still human, right? I am, at least. We still get afraid. We still have the places that feel like they're going to kill us. "If we go there. Oh my goodness. If I have that conversation, I literally might die." Maybe not actually, literally you might not die, but it might feel like it, right? So we come to this moment where, to me again, it's one of those moments of God's grace saying to us, "Listen, I get it. We all get afraid. And that's part of why Christ came to live and to die amongst us: as a fundamental affirmation that death doesn't actually win. That love holds and sustains all of us...."

Here, in his death, Jesus models to us that no terror, least of these, death, can separate us from God's love. And this is our invitation to likewise be a people who live with our hands open, say: "Into your hands. Into your hands...."

This past summer, I lived one of these moments. Some of you know that my brother has lived with an active addiction to alcohol for over a decade. A year ago in March, he became sober, which is wonderful. He came through town and saw my spouse, Andy and I, and then he went east to New York because he's a snowbird caddy. While he was there, he began to experience an acute mental health crisis. On Sunday, June 10th I preached a sermon, "Breathe In," here at this church. Monday of that week, I called my brother and as he was talking, I began looking up diagnoses to understand what was happening to him. The next Sunday, I preached again, and the following Monday I spoke with my brother again when he and his girlfriend made the decision that he would come back to Minnesota as I'm his only living family member.

On Tuesday of that week, I woke up with pneumonia. Why? Because when I was a little girl at three and a half, I decided it was my job to take care of him. And my body still believed that. Summer was a harrowing time, both for me and my brother because the location of my own terror was that I didn't know how to forgive myself if my brother didn't live and I didn't. And the terror felt consuming. I didn't know how to live with the beauty of my life in the face of the suffering he was enduring.

I told my therapist, it felt like I was walking the edge of a cliff and my brother was down in the abyss crying out, "Sara, help me." And I just wanted to jump in after him, but I knew that if I did that, we both would die. Metaphorically, at least because the truth is I never could have saved him. And along this path I was walking on the edge of the abyss to my right was a rolling beautiful green hill filled with beautiful flowers, and my wonderful Andy was standing in the field, loving me in a way that good former addiction therapists do, with his hands open saying, "Babe, please remember your life."

So last week when I was at a birthday party, I was posed the question: what was the most important decision you made this year? And I said, "I chose my life." I chose to live in the face of my own terror, of not knowing what the end would be for my brother. I knew I had to go into the darkness of myself and my own story and fear. If I, in any way, could affirm the truth that I live and believe—that this is a God of resurrection; to say yes to the healing I needed in my own life...but I had to choose that. And it wasn't easy. It

was the most painful decision I've made as an adult. And I didn't know what would happen. I'm telling you the story today having received permission from my brother, who I spoke with this morning. My brother and his doctors were able to get him back into a place where his mental health has stabilized...and he just celebrated a year of sobriety, which is wonderful. But here's the thing: I didn't know if that would be the end of the story, but either way I couldn't change or write it for the story was between my brother and God. And as for me, I had to face my fear and release it in order to find my own way into life and freedom in the midst of my terror.

I don't know what those places are in your life: the places that feel like if you were to touch them, they might kill you. But I do know this: that healing doesn't happen by trying to avoid those spaces. Healing happens as we gently and tenderly move into them with our hands open saying, "Okay, God, I trust you." As we go into the darkness—it's there that we find these places of resurrection, promise, and life....

And I tell you what: by going into my own terror, it's what allowed me this December, in the middle of miscarrying, to sit across the table from my spouse, to feel the sacredness of God's Spirit's presence. And to realize that I had chosen my life and that God was about healing me. I had chosen myself and my life. And that is why indeed we say and can affirm: "Into your hands, I commit my spirit." We, like Jesus, are invited to be an "into your hands" kind of people...who go into the darkness, who face our fear, trusting that life, that resurrection life is always the point and, indeed, it is our promise.

So tonight, as we come to the table and this time of communion, may you come with whatever it is that you carry, whatever the place is of longing or the fear you hold, whatever those may be in find that at this table, its healing is light.

No matter what may be, may this be an act of open-handed surrender: "Into your hands. Into your hands we commit our spirits."

And may we then journey through the long night toward the promised morn that we will indeed see together, for love heals our fear as we turn and face them, opening our hands in surrender. Amen.⁶²

This is a sermon about the way of the cross—of the call to go into the dark and find and discover resurrection life. Here I name not only fear as a very real human condition, but also make clearer the vital importance of our continuing to go further into the dark, even as we are afraid.

The wages of whiteness and white supremacy, of patriarchy, and of class privilege are all rooted in refusals of opening our hands to trust and crying "Into your hands I commit my spirit,"

⁶² Wilhelm Garbers, "Into Your Hands."

and so I am trying to help cultivate resiliency and the capacity for resistance in people who proclaim Christ, that we might become Christians. In so doing, I model how I have experienced this in my own life and story. I detail how I grew up believing that it was my job to care for my brother, and when faced with his possible literal death, I did not know if I could survive it, and so I had to face my own terror and open my hands so that I might stay alive. Likewise, I invite the congregation to turn toward their own terror that we might be able to undo the formation of ourselves wrought in the fires of white supremacy and move toward the invitation to become reborn as more Christian and more human persons.⁶³

Resurrection: From Being Born Again to Awakening

I know I am because I said, I am. [3x]

My body is home [2x]

I know I am because I said, I am. [3x]

...

Your sexiness is defined by concentric circles within your wood

It is wisdom

You are a goddamn tree stump with leaves sprouting out

Reborn.

⁶³ Here I am invoking the ethical formation necessary to resist American Christian Nationalism and the operation of how white supremacy forms white people so that we lose our humanity. I do so following the work of Emilie Townes, Ibram X. Kendi, Resmaa Menakem, Audre Lorde, and Kelly Brown Douglas. See: Emilie Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, and her work on the womanist dancing mind capable of refusing the “fantastic hegemonic imagination.” Though her work is centered on Womanist ethics and the pathway for life for black persons suffering under white supremacy, if white people wish to join in the common cause of us all being able to flourish, this work of disruption of the “fantastic hegemonic imagination” is also (though differently) required for white people. Kendi similarly writes about the work of being anti-racist and our necessary commitment to it in order that white people might participate in collective humanity in Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019). Menakem specifically names it as “white body supremacy” as a way of making clear that the problem is not white people, but the formation of our bodies and selves through the violent ministrations of ideologies that would render white bodies as more visible and human in Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands*. Kelly Brown Douglas also writes about the “Making of the Anglo-Saxon Myth” and “The Making of America’s Grand Narrative,” tracing also the ways in which “Manifest Destiny” has all functioned so as make the particular functioning of American Christian Nationalism and the operations of White Supremacy which renders white people as unhuman in our relationship to ourselves and to black and brown bodies in Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, especially chapters 1 and 5. Finally, here I am especially indebted to the work of Audre Lorde in her “Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism” where she writes to the largely white female conference attendees at *National Women’s Studies Association Conference* in Storrs, Connecticut. In naming that the natural response to racism is anger, she invites white women to get in touch with their anger and their silences, calling them to join with Women of Color: “We welcome all women who can meet us, face to face, beyond objectification and beyond guilt.” Audre Lorde, “Uses of Anger,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 133.

—Mary Lambert, “Body Love”⁶⁴

My individual teleological ethics is rooted not only in a sense that the task of self-formation calls one to journey the way of the cross but also to discover the corollary promise of resurrection. By resurrection, I mean not the life that is promised by most churches on Easter Sunday with a triumphalist “theology of glory” where all is vanquished. No, not only is such a theology of resurrection mis-matched with the experience of most of our lives, but it also emboldens Christian Nationalism with its promises of greatness, power, and safeguarding.

Thus, in speaking of resurrection, I employ Shelly Rambo’s work which reminds us that Easter Sunday brings with it the betrayals of Maundy Thursday, the violence of Good Friday, the silence of Holy Saturday, and the scars that remain on Easter Monday. Here resurrection is not an escape from the realities of death, suffering, and trauma but rather that which allows us to live and flourish *in the midst of* the scars and wounds we have known.’⁶⁵

My favorite way that this theo-ethical imagination has shown up in my work is from Easter Sunday 2021. During the COVID-19 pandemic we began an Alternative Service, featuring popular “secular” music instead of traditional Christian Contemporary Music.⁶⁶ As we were planning for Easter, I suggested that we do a reflective engagement with Taylor Swift’s song “Evermore.” My colleague, Andrew Zhao, was concerned that the song was not “Easter-y enough” because they talk about a person who has been down, trying to find where they went

⁶⁴ Mary Lambert, “Body Love, Part 2,” track 4 on *Welcome to the Age of My Body*, Capital Records, 2013, compact disc (CD).

⁶⁵ Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, TN: Westminster John Knox, 2010).

⁶⁶ This is connected to my desire to try and find language for being church in “a world come of age.”

wrong, worried that the pain would be (for)evermore. By the end of the song however, it names that they realized they were not alone and there is a flicker of hope “this pain wouldn’t be evermore.”⁶⁷

This is the promise of resurrection that self-formation knows: not that we will be saved from the suffering or the terror, but that we know we can survive it and so we live out this liminal, partial, and fraught promise so that we might live love of God, our neighbors, and ourselves. This is *actual* good news that can aid us on Easter Monday as we must face suffering and injustice in our lives and the world.

My theo-ethical imagination of resurrection is also shaped by the time I spent in El Salvador and the work and writings of John Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría. Both wrote about the cross and the “crucified peoples” of Latin America as those who are victimized by systemic oppression. Their call to the work of resurrection is to take the crucified down off of their crosses and see resurrection at work.⁶⁸ Jesus’ death and resurrection thus produces a “hope in the power of God over the injustice that produces victims.”⁶⁹ Sobrino argues that this understanding

⁶⁷ Taylor Swift, “Evermore,” track 15 on *Evermore*, Republic, 2020, compact disc (cd). I ended up taking about how this song represents actually good news because we all wake up Easter Monday and our real lives continue and we need a hope that can actually aid us in facing suffering and injustice for another day. So the Easter hope is hope, but it is liminal and fraught in a world where violence and pain persists. I believe that such a theology is necessary if it is to resist the forces of white supremacy and all pretensions toward power.

⁶⁸ The book that is most helpful in opening this theological imagination is: Sobrino, *Witnesses to the Kingdom*. See also: Dean Brackley, “The Ground Beneath the Cross: The Theology of Ignacio Ellacuría,” *Theological Studies* 62, no. 1 (2001): 176-178. Burke, *The Ground Beneath the Cross*. Ignacio Ellacuría, “The Crucified People.” Whitfield, *Paying the Price*.

⁶⁹ Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 42.

provides hope both that we can *be* raised and then also *be raisers* of others.⁷⁰ As Christine M.

Smith writes in *Risking the Terror: Resurrection in this Life*:

Resurrection as process, not moment; resurrection as neighborhood and community transformation; resurrection as bodily integrity; resurrection as a refusal to play cards with the jailer; resurrection as resistance and insurrection; resurrection as coming out; resurrection as remembrance and presence; and resurrection as that which we practice...may these images lead us to claim and name every conceivable expression of resurrection life among us.⁷¹

Although I am shaped by their work, I focus on the self-formation implications of resurrection and the necessary work of tending to our own stories and suffering. I do so both because we can only love our neighbors as far as we love ourselves and because doing so allows us to disrupt the operation of white supremacy that believes it our job to heal/fix/save others instead of paying attention to the ways in which our refusal of our inner work prevents us from fostering the conditions for life and flourishing of others.

In writing and speaking about resurrection, I initially try to invite the congregation to engage this work by following the call “to be born again.” I do so because there is a significant portion of the historic community members who have bought in to an Evangelical understanding of faith as the call “to be born again.” I work within this language in order to expand the vision of what it means “to be born again” from that of a privatized personal faith that makes one a likely disciple of American Christian Nationalism to one who keeps on growing and, in truth, awakening. Over time I have realized that this language of “being born again” is problematic not only because it is the language of evangelicalism, but because my aim in cultivating a vision for the task of self-formation is rooted in a desire to assist the congregation in becoming better

⁷⁰ Ibid., 46.

⁷¹ Christine Smith, *Risking the Terror: Resurrection in this Life* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 113.

humans and more Christian, which requires the commitment of adult persons who awaken to injustice, pain, and suffering that prevents human flourishing. Additionally, as I already noted in the last chapter, “awakening” or being “woke” is language both for feminist coming-of-age and naming of the selves who resist forces of injustice in our world.

My work in this sphere felt especially urgent post-2016 as Evangelical support of Trump remained high.⁷² Calling people to resurrection life then is about the call to *become awoken again and again* to the realities of injustice and racism.⁷³ Asking people to die to themselves and be born anew, I acknowledge the reality of fear and try to invite the community to continue further in. One such sermon I preached on the true liminality of resurrection comes out of Mark 16:1-8, where I argue that verse eight is the probable true ending of the book.⁷⁴

I wanted to stop at verse eight today for a few reasons. Partially, because textually speaking this ending has the most support for its being the original. Additionally, I think this ending best fits with the story and the theology of Mark. For, unlike the other

⁷² For further analysis of White Evangelical support of Donald Trump, I highly recommend the work of Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) and their founder’s recently published book *White Too Long* (Jones, *White Too Long*). For more of their work, see, for instance their Spotlight Analysis: Public Religion Research International, “White Evangelical Protestants Attitudes Toward Donald Trump, 2015-2019,” (January 3, 2020), <https://www.prrri.org/spotlight/white-evangelical-protestants-attitudes-toward-donald-trump-2015-2019/>. They note: “White evangelical Protestant attitudes about Donald Trump have moved through three distinct phases since PRRI has been tracking them beginning in 2015:

1. Before Trump became the official Republican nominee for president in mid-2016, Trump’s favorability never reached the majority among white evangelical Protestants.
2. Between Trump’s nomination and the inauguration, Trump’s favorability among white evangelical Protestants advanced past the 60-percent mark.
3. By the time of his inauguration in early 2017, Trump’s favorability among white evangelical Protestants jumped to nearly three quarters (74%). While Trump has struggled to lift his favorability numbers among the general population above the low-40-percent range, throughout his presidency, favorability of Trump among white evangelicals has remained exceptionally high, between 65% and 77% with an average favorability rating of 71%.”

⁷³ James Baldwin writes of this when he says: “I imagine that one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, that they will be forced to deal with pain.” James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Beacon Press, 1955), 597.

⁷⁴ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, “Turning to the Wilderness,” sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, February 28, 2021, <https://sarawg.com/2021/02/28/turning-to-the-wilderness-a-sermon-on-luke-41-10/>.

Gospels, this one doesn't end with the vision of resurrection; we don't see the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus. No, this one ends with the women and disciples being afraid. I think ending at verse eight is really good news for us because it preaches a particular kind of gospel...one that resonates with our lives wherein we know what it is to not know the ending, the one in which we are terrified and uncertain about what will happen.⁷⁵

If the "good news" is actually to be good news for our lives, then it needs to be able to be honest in view of history and our realities. So, I root into the Bible to tell the story of the way that the revolution comes is through being uncertain what will happen and afraid. As I preached, the Gospel according to Mark (*Kata Markon*) is good news for us because we have all been afraid, even as we still profess belief in resurrection.

The Gospel and the good news according to Mark is that the Suffering Servant is also Emmanuel, the God with us in our suffering. The God with us in our fear. I think that having this as one of the Gospel options can be really good news in those moments when we don't yet know what happens next. We trust it, we believe the promise...but it doesn't feel real yet. The tomb is empty, and we haven't seen Jesus. We are filled with longing, but we don't feel the hope of the promise, we only know the fear. And what good news it is to know that we aren't alone in being afraid and that God meets us...even in those places of pain.

Together as community we face whatever the weather brings, whatever our lives bring to us. We walk with each other and we remind one another in the darkest moments that God is still with us.

I know you're afraid. I'm afraid too. But hold my hand and let us walk this path together. THIS is the good news of the Gospel of Jesus according to Mark: they were afraid, and we are too. AND God meets us in our fear and brings tidings of good news: You are loved. You are seen, and the God of all things has walked amongst us and knows our suffering and pain, so let's walk together and face the terror...even as we tremble and are afraid.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Wilhelm Garbers, "For They Were Afraid." Scholars are divided on the question of whether the "longer ending" was created deliberately to finish the Gospel of Mark (as contended by James Kelhoffer) or if it began its existence as a freestanding text which was used to "patch" the otherwise abruptly ending text of Mark. FYI- Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, the earliest complete manuscripts of Mark. Other manuscripts that omit the last twelve verses include: minuscule 304 (12th century), Syriac Sinaiticus (from the late 4th-century), and a Sahidic manuscript. In addition to these, over 100 Armenian manuscripts, as well as the two oldest Georgian manuscripts, also omit the appendix. See: James A. Kelhoffer, *Miracle and Mission: The Authentication of Missionaries and Their Message in the Longer Ending of Mark. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, Reihe 2*, no. 112 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 2000).

⁷⁶ Wilhelm Garbers, "For They Were Afraid."

Mark became a witness not to the spectral or miraculous, but of the fleshy-earthly realness that we all know from our own lives. A world bereft of virgin births, it is the gospel that reminds the early church that suffering is part of the life of faith and Christ then is the Messiah who suffers-with. By normalizing this fear, I hoped to invite the community to tap into their own fears and vulnerability, because I was convinced that if healing was to come to this community, it would need to be via their ability to touch into their own need of love and their vulnerability. I wanted them to think of faith as a risk; discipleship as discovered in the face of suffering, and to cultivate the resiliency to keep going even as they get afraid. In so doing, I am hoping to foster their formation so that they can become people who are shaped by the encounter with God, themselves, and their neighbors and are able to move toward love and flourishing life for themselves and others in the face of American Christian Nationalism.

We, this people, on a small and lonely planet
 Traveling through casual space
 Past aloof stars, across the way of indifferent suns
 To a destination where all signs tell us
 It is possible and imperative that we learn
 A brave and startling truth

And when we come to it
 To the day of peacemaking
 When we release our fingers
 From fists of hostility
 And allow the pure air to cool our palms

When we come to it
 When the curtain falls on the minstrel show of hate
 And faces sooted with scorn are scrubbed clean
 When battlefields and coliseum
 No longer rake our unique and particular sons and daughters
 Up with the bruised and bloody grass
 To lie in identical plots in foreign soil

When the rapacious storming of the churches
 The screaming racket in the temples have ceased

When the pennants are waving gaily
 When the banners of the world tremble
 Stoutly in the good, clean breeze

When we come to it
 When we let the rifles fall from our shoulders
 And children dress their dolls in flags of truce
 When land mines of death have been removed
 And the aged can walk into evenings of peace
 When religious ritual is not perfumed
 By the incense of burning flesh
 And childhood dreams are not kicked awake
 By nightmares of abuse

When we come to it
 Then we will confess that not the Pyramids
 With their stones set in mysterious perfection
 Nor the Gardens of Babylon
 Hanging as eternal beauty
 In our collective memory
 Not the Grand Canyon
 Kindled into delicious color
 By Western sunsets

Nor the Danube, flowing its blue soul into Europe
 Not the sacred peak of Mount Fuji
 Stretching to the Rising Sun
 Neither Father Amazon nor Mother Mississippi who, without favor,
 Nurture all creatures in the depths and on the shores
 These are not the only wonders of the world

When we come to it
 We, this people, on this minuscule and kithless globe
 Who reach daily for the bomb, the blade and the dagger
 Yet who petition in the dark for tokens of peace
 We, this people on this mote of matter
 In whose mouths abide cankerous words
 Which challenge our very existence
 Yet out of those same mouths
 Come songs of such exquisite sweetness
 That the heart falters in its labor
 And the body is quieted into awe

We, this people, on this small and drifting planet
 Whose hands can strike with such abandon

That in a twinkling, life is sapped from the living
Yet those same hands can touch with such healing, irresistible tenderness
That the haughty neck is happy to bow
And the proud back is glad to bend
Out of such chaos, of such contradiction
We learn that we are neither devils nor divines

When we come to it
We, this people, on this wayward, floating body
Created on this earth, of this earth
Have the power to fashion for this earth
A climate where every man and every woman
Can live freely without sanctimonious piety
Without crippling fear

When we come to it
We must confess that we are the possible
We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world
That is when, and only when
We come to it.

—Maya Angelou, “A Brave and Startling Truth”⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Maya Angelou, “A Brave and Startling Truth,” in *The Complete Poetry* (New York: Random House, 2015), 269-271.

CHAPTER SEVEN
SOCIAL TELEOLOGICAL ETHICS
BECOMING A PEOPLE OF BREATH

I can't breathe
You're taking my life from me
I can't breathe
Will anyone fight for me?

—H.E.R., “I Can’t Breathe”¹

Introduction

If chapter six centered on the call to “Be Christian,” then chapter seven explores what it means to “Be the Church” through the lens of social teleological ethics. Social Teleological ethics relates to “community values, social norms, visions of the ‘common good’, and solidarity.”² In a time where the church in the United States is largely associated with white, right-wing American Christian Nationalism and efforts toward maintaining/gaining power, the vision herein is grounded in exploration of what it means to “Be the Church” as the call to be and become a “People of Breath.”

Part of the reason I turn to this calling to be a “people of breath” is on account of racial justice advocates’ rendering of Eric Garner’s last words before he was murdered by police of

¹ H.E.R., “I Can’t Breathe,” Single Track on *I Can’t Breathe* (RCA, 2020, compact disc (CD)).

² Haker, “Ethical Reflexions in Nanomedicine,” 71.

“people of breath,” it is a signal that we are called to be in solidarity with those who literally cannot breathe and join with them and others in fostering the conditions necessary for life and breath for everyone. Moreover, in identifying the social teleological ethical realm as the formational work of becoming a people of breath, I highlight learnings about how breath, meditation, and mindfulness all contribute to stress-reduction, well-being, and living from one’s frontal cortex so that one can show up and be able to live without being overly determined by fear of the other.³ Importantly, while I want us to do that work as individuals (as I detail in the prior chapter), I also call to *us as a community* to let “breath work” become our communal commitment and practice. This call—though more radical of an invitation to deeper work necessary for white people to engage in solidarity and social justice efforts—has a history and grounding in the way that we as a congregational church gather to collectively discern the Spirit and then respond as one body.⁴

Being a people of breath is connected with the congregation’s stated values. During our ReFroming process we named our desire to be a church that is about the Spirit and cultivating space for healing of ourselves and our world: a place where people can “breathe in” and “breathe

³ Ezequiel Morsella, et al., “Cognitive and Neural Components of the Phenomenology of Agency,” *Neurocase* 17, no. 3 (2011): 209–230; Jennifer Creese, et al., “‘We All Really Need to Just Take a Breath’: Composite Narratives of Hospital Doctors’ Well-Being During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 18, no. 4 (2021): 2051–2069. Bruno A. Cayoun, *Mindfulness-Integrated CBT for Well-Being and Personal Growth: Four Steps to Enhance Inner Calm, Self-Confidence and Relationships* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2015). Shamash Alidina, *The Mindful Way through Stress: The Proven 8-Week Path to Health, Happiness, and Well-Being* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2015). Yi-Yuan Tang, et al., “The Neuroscience of Mindfulness Meditation,” *Nature Reviews. Neuroscience* 16, no. 4 (2015): 213–225. Megan S. Wheeler, et al., “The Neuroscience of Mindfulness: How Mindfulness Alters the Brain and Facilitates Emotion Regulation.” *Mindfulness* 8, no. 6 (2017): 1471–1487.

⁴ See, for instance: Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands*; Reynolds, Jason and Ibram X. Kendi. *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2020); Jones, *White too Long*.

out.”⁵ In this way, I take a commitment that was already present in the community in order to build upon it, while also deepening and expanding the vision of what it would mean to breathe in and out in concert with God’s Spirit and all of creation.⁶

What I mean is that while there has long been a desire within the church community to be a people of the heart and Spirit, part of the cultural norms of Edina have historically been about looking as good and put together as possible. At the time of my arrival on staff, there was a lot of fear and resistance on the part of many members to doing the deeper inner work around trauma and other vulnerabilities, even if this resistance was based off of unfamiliarity with doing such work and naming it publicly. So, in turning to breath, I support the gathered community in cultivating norms and capacities to be a people who hold space for one another to be humans who struggle so that we together might breathe more deeply.

The second contextual reason I turn to the call to be a “people of breath” is because I am seeking to enhance the community value of breath and healing, moving it from its historic more privatized sense to a more explicitly political one. Thus, my sermons call the community to become marked by deep breath where we join in solidarity toward not just breath, but flourishing life and deep breath for all people. In wrestling with what it might mean to be a people of breath in response to George Floyd’s murder, we challenged the church to take up changing our name as a deep signal to ourselves and neighbors that we are committed to a world where we can all breathe.

⁵ ReForming was a process for the church to discern where God was leading us next. See: Chapter 1 and Appendices C and D.

⁶ See Appendix D.

I animate this call to be a people of breath—as I will make clear in the pages that follow—by turning to the first image of God/what God does in the Jewish and Christian scriptures: God as *ruach*. It is *ruach*, the spirit of creation, who breathes and hovers over the waters. God as *ruach* calls the church to be formed by this breath of God and to likewise be a people of breath in the world. I next highlight major themes, community values, social norms, and visions for the common good and solidarity as they are constitutive of what it means to be a people of breath.⁷ I do so by first exploring biblical images that aid us in becoming a people of breath: (1) the call to be a resurrection people; and, (2) the call to be a people of the promise who live covenant faithfulness and loving-kindness (*chesed*) with God and with one another. I then explore how being a people of breath moves us toward the world in solidarity, care for the neighbor and the stranger.⁸

Finally, I wonder how, as a people of breath, we are to aid the conditions of freedom, which is flourishing life for ourselves and our neighbors. In all these ways, I articulate what it means to be the church—to be a people, formed by the breath (*ruach*) of God—who then make

⁷ Note: the Hebrew tradition distinguishes between God (*Elohim*) and *ruach*. In Christianity we then take Spirit to be equivalent with the Hebrew tradition of *ruach*. As my Jewish colleague Max Brumberg-Kraus noted: “On some level, the incorporation of Greek metaphysics influences this change from Israelites’ more elemental “spirit/breath-from-god” to Christians’ “breath/spirit-AS-god” which lives in people.”

⁸ Note: *chesed* translates best as loving-kindness, this is tied with the Ruth as the embodiment of covenant faithfulness. Also, though I am, like Hauerwas, concerned about the ways in which the Christian story forms and shapes and makes us a people, I diverge from his work in important ways. On the one hand, I am committed to ethical paradigms that are larger than the Christian story and think that pluralistic ethics are not only possible but also necessary in our time. Additionally, I am more focused on how our being shaped by the story of God and becoming Christian invites and compels us to move toward our neighbor. Finally, and fundamentally, I think that our work to become Christian as the church is always judged by our ability to be a people who help to embody more universal ethics (e.g. human rights) in our particular way (as the church). If we fail to live up to upholding the basic minimum of human rights then we have both failed as a human community and as church. For more on Hauerwas, see: Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013); *Approaching the End: Eschatological Reflections on Church, Politics, and Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013); *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

possible for more breath and life for one another, and foster the conditions so that all might be able to breathe. To be a people of breath is to become the church who live in view of the reality that it was here, in our city, that George Floyd was murdered and then seek to become a people of breath in our world.⁹

Ruach

When the world's so heavy, I can't stand
I close my eyes and start again
Though my heart is in my hands
I won't break, give me faith to bend

Am I looking for revival?
Am I dressed in other's sin?
Hold my breath until I'm honest
Will I ever breathe again?

— Joy Oladokun, “Breathe Again”¹⁰

The Hebrew word *ruach* ranges of meaning include wind/spirit/breath, and there is a deep connection between these ideas—that the Spirit is breath, is life, is that which blows. Not only on account of the biblical conceptions of the Spirit as *ruach*, but modern neuroscience has also uncovered the importance of breath not just for life, but for our ability to live out of our frontal cortex, which impacts our well-being.¹¹ This matters, for the church formed by American

⁹ The cry of “I can’t breathe!” has been the death cry of many black persons who have been killed at the hands of police brutality. Eric Garner uttered these words in 2014 as he died while in a choke hold. Since then, the words have become a rallying cry for justice in the movement for Black Lives Matter. These words were echoed in Minneapolis by George Floyd as he died at the hands of Derek Chauvin in May of 2020. See: “I Can’t Breathe,” *Wikipedia*. According to a NYT article, the phrase has been used by over 70 people who died in police custody. See: Baker “Three Words. 70 Cases. The Tragic History of ‘I Can’t Breathe.’”

¹⁰ Joy Oladokun, “Breathe Again,” track 10 on *In Defense of My Own Happiness, Vol. 1*, White Body Records, 2020, compact disc (CD).

¹¹ See, for instance: Jose L. Herrero, et al., “Breathing Above the Brain Stem: Volitional Control and Attentional Modulation in Humans,” *Journal of Neurophysiology* 119 (2018): 145-159. Andrea Zaccaro, et al., “How Breath-Control Can Change Your Life: A Systematic Review on Psycho-Physiological Correlates of Slow Breathing,” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 12 (Sept 2018): 1-16. Roderik J. S. Gerritsen and Guido P. H. Band, “Breath of Life: The Respiratory Vagal Stimulation Model of Contemplative Activity,” *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 12 (2018): 397 (<https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2018.00397>). Brigid Schulte, “Harvard Neuroscientist: Meditation not

Christian Nationalism is one that lacks breath and its adherents seek strong identities that are supported by a God who supports their violence and refusal of the other. If we are going to counter the appeal of this type of Christianity, we literally have to help people remember and learn how to breathe.

The first time I spoke about *ruach*, inviting the community to become a place of breath was during my first sermon when I was on staff. Entitled “In Spirit and in Truth,”¹² I preached on John 4:1-26 where Jesus is encountered by the Samaritan woman at the well. This story is in part about ethnic and cultural difference as the woman presses Jesus about how far his message extends. She says: “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” Jesus replies to her that both traditions who look for external authority are wrong.

Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father **in spirit and truth**, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship **in spirit and truth**.¹³

It is the *ruach* who breathes within all of us, and if we would but access this breath then we, across our lines of difference, can worship together in Spirit and in truth. Again, in 2020 I turn to the *ruach* the in my sermon on Zechariah 4:1-7. I connect our call to be a people of breath

Only Reduces Stress, Here’s how it Changes Your Brain,” *Washington Post* (May 26, 2015): <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2015/05/26/harvard-neuroscientist-meditation-not-only-reduces-stress-it-literally-changes-your-brain/>. Emma Seppälä, Christina Bradley, and Michael R. Goldstein, “Why Breathing Is So Effective at Reducing Stress,” *Harvard Business Review* (September 29, 2020): <https://hbr.org/2020/09/research-why-breathing-is-so-effective-at-reducing-stress>.

¹² Wilhelm Garbers, “In Spirit and in Truth.”

¹³ John 4:19-24 (NRSV). Emphasis mine.

with a world where people literally cannot breathe. I preached this sermon mere weeks into the COVID-19 pandemic and shutdown of life as we had known it, a time in which people were suffering from an illness that killed them through their inability to physically breathe. As so many of us were afraid, our breathing was shallow and riddled with fear. I turn to this passage to remind people that it is “not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit:”¹⁴

Suffice it to say that some cool stuff is happening here in Zechariah that is telling the people about how God is at work in the world. The vision in the fourth chapter depicts the rebuilding of the temple and how that will happen, and we're told that it's not by force nor by strength, but by God's Spirit that the rebuilding of the temple is going to happen. And we're told not to despise the small beginnings, for God's temple is going to be rebuilt, and people are going to be restored, if only they will trust the God who works not by power (like the Empires they are suffering under), but by Spirit (who is in the small beginnings).

That's a little bit about what's happening both in the book of Zechariah and particularly in Chapter 4. And I think that central to the message of this book is Zechariah 4:6: a reminder that it's not by power, nor by might, but by God's Spirit. It's a profound reminder to the people and to us about the way that God shows up in the world, doing the work of rebuilding and laboring with a people who are still under the rule of the Persian Empire.

Now keep in mind that these people, they've been enslaved, they've been oppressed. Remember these are the folks who endured 400+ years of slavery in Egypt. They come into the promised land and they built their own kingdom and yet they are then enslaved again. They're carted off to Babylon. They've just come back to their land, but it's still not theirs, they are vassals of the Persian empire. I imagine they are exhausted and beaten down. They are wondering where God is. They're longing for God to interrupt the story of what's been happening in their world. They want God to overthrow these oppressive kingdoms. They want everything to be fine. They want freedom and breath.

Does any of that sound familiar?

We ourselves are in the midst of a global pandemic where the reality is that there is something bigger than us that we can't on our own just overthrow that's impacting us and our lives and we too are asking and wondering: Where's a vaccine? Are people on the front lines getting enough of what they need in terms of ventilators and PPE supplies? How do we keep each other as safe as possible? How do we care for the most vulnerable in our midst? And we cry it out, "Oh God, please come!" And Zechariah invites us and reminds us that the way God comes and the way God shows up isn't just with some lightning bolt that destroys everything or magically cures the whole world...for it's not

¹⁴ Zechariah 4:6 (NRSV).

my power or by might, but it's by God's Spirit of a God who comes in the small things and in the midst of the suffering. . . .

For it isn't by power, no—it isn't by might that we win. It's by love, it's by Spirit, it's by breath, it's by awakening to the world as God has created it, to join with God in care and concern for all of our neighbors, to truly love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves.¹⁵

It's in this space where I think God shows up. God who breathes on us. Do you know that the word in the Hebrew Bible for the Spirit is *ruach*...another translation for this is breath? Just like in Genesis where we are told that God hovered over the waters and breathed (*ruach*).¹⁶

This is the Spirit is the same one who falls in Acts 2, the Spirit who births the church in diversity, the one who breathes life and fosters the conditions necessary for it. This is the Spirit of whom the church is in need so that we might be the church in the face of American Christian Nationalism. As I preached about Acts 2 and the movement of the breath of God:

I know that's hard in our times, but if we could just take a breath—which is another word for Spirit, *ruach*, I think we get to tap into that invitation and that space for us to “Be the Church” to honor others even as they speak languages we don't understand, and to seek to listen for how the Spirit might be bringing good news, even if it looks different than we thought.¹⁷

It is thus with the call to follow the God who is *ruach* that I hope to animate to the community our call to join God in being a people who are formed by breath and then as a community to be a place of breath both for each other and for our world.

Resurrection People | People of Promise

God, it hurts to be human
Without you I'd be losing

¹⁵ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, “Hope Interrupts Power,” sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, March 29, 2020, <https://sarawg.com/2020/03/29/hope-interrupts-power-a-sermon-in-the-midst-of-coronavirus-zech-41-7/>.

¹⁶ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, “Breathe In,” sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, June 10, 2018, <https://sarawg.com/2018/06/10/breathe-in-a-sermon-on-joshua-17-9/>.

¹⁷ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, “Can I Get a Witness?” sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, November 8, 2020, <https://sarawg.com/2020/11/08/can-i-get-a-witness/>.

And someday we'll face the music
 God, it hurts to be human
 But I've got you, you, you, you, you, you, hey
 And you've got me, me, me, me, too
 —P!nk, “Hurts to Be Human”¹⁸

Resurrection People

The theological imagination central to my vision for social teleological ethics is how we *become* a people of breath through consideration of different ways that the Bible speaks about what it means to be the people of God. One of the images we see in the New Testament is how the church is called to be what I name “a resurrection people”: those who rise up together to be a people of life and healing in the world. While on the individual teleological axis I am concerned with how resurrection forms us to be Christian, on the social teleological axis I am interested in how we might be the church and, as a collective, be a community who is shaped by and lives out resurrection. The sermon that best exemplifies this in dialogue with I Corinthians 15:12-20, entitled “Rise Up.”¹⁹

I preached this sermon right after our then senior minister’s wife had received a cancer diagnosis of Stage 4 pancreas cancer. Preaching on the resurrection from the dead is challenging even in the best of times. Figuring out how to navigate that in a community as theologically and politically diverse as mine is even more complicated. But to do so in the midst of a space where people were grieving and looking for meaning was overwhelming. The sermon title was based on the words of the musical *Hamilton*’s song, “Rise Up!”²⁰ In so many ways, this musical

¹⁸ P!nk, “Hurts 2B Human,” track 6 *Hurts 2B Human*, RCA Records, 2019, compact disc (CD).

¹⁹ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, “Rise Up,” given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, February 17, 2019, <https://sarawg.com/2019/02/22/rise-up-a-sermon-on-i-corinthians-1512-20/>.

²⁰ Lin-Manuel Miranda, Albert Johnson, Kejuan Waliek Muchita, Osten Harvey, Jr., Roger Troutman, Christopher

captures my sense of the call of the church—to be a people who bring ourselves and our whole stories and together “Rise Up;” to be a people who live out a vision of another world and embark on the work of the revolution of love. This is the work of becoming a people, oriented toward the good of our neighbors.

For Paul, as is recorded in I Corinthians, the physical resurrection from the dead matters greatly. So much so, he writes, that if Christ had not been raised, then all is in vain and there is a meaninglessness to faith which demanded they risk of themselves in order to be Christian, as Paul had. It is this resurrection of the body of Christ that makes possible the body of the church, and that is the point and the vision here. It allows for and makes possible the church—a place where Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female all become one in Christ (Galatians 3:28) through the resurrection they become a body and one people (I Corinthians 12).

Within this sermon I employ the grounding for the body and resurrection in order to call and invite the community to become a collective body in a new way—to become a resurrection people—and then, to become a people who then embody a faith in the world that cares for other bodies through the work of neighbor love and solidarity. In turning to Paul’s vision of resurrection, I re-frame it not as a call to a privatized faith as has long been the legacy of white Christianity in the United States and in this church, but to become a people who can rise up and truly love God and love our neighbors. In this way I intentionally, like Sölle, wed the mystical with the political.

Wallace, "My Shot," track 3 on *Hamilton (Original Broadway Cast Recording)*, Atlantic, 2015, compact disc (CD).

I turned to Oscar Romero and Ignacio Ellacuría and their work as a way of naming the vision of solidarity and the call to move into the real lives of our neighbors that resurrection opens up:

The centrality of the embodied and the real of our lives, and God's intimate concern for them, is pervasive throughout Paul's letter to the Corinthians. In a similar vein, one of my favorite theologians, Ignacio Ellacuría, wrote about the gospel as that which invites us to deal with *la realidad*, the real.²¹ For him, the call of the Christian is to actually encounter the world in the midst of the real of our lives. And the real of our lives know pain, know suffering, know longing, know death...and it is this spot precisely, Ignacio Ellacuría reminds us, where the Gospel of life and resurrection breathes. For him, we are fundamentally at all times held and sustained by a God of resurrection life, and when *la realidad* feels like it might kill and destroy us, this is actually the moment and the place where the promise of life—the good news—shows up. That is not to say that faith ignores the fact that our lives are riven with pain and cancer and all sorts of other trouble, but it's an affirmation that these things don't get to have the final word. For the fundamental *realidad*, is the kingdom and love of God.²²

This reality then is opened up and made ours through the resurrection of Christ which animates our ability to embody resurrection life in the midst of a world where death appears to have victory and power. This notion was made real to me when I had the opportunity to travel to El Salvador a number of years ago. While I was there I heard the story of a man named Óscar Romero. Óscar Romero was the Bishop of El Salvador during the gestational days of the Salvadoran Civil War.²³ He had been encountered by God in a way that is not dissimilar from Paul and he believed that the gospel invites us to radically realign the way that we order our lives...which is, indeed, Paul's message in first Corinthians, right? The gospel—the good news—fundamentally re-orientes how we live. Óscar Romero was challenged and changed by this gospel. Once bishop he began to speak out about the injustice that he was seeing in his country, preaching that people must stop the violence and stand as Christians against injustice. He was perceived as a political threat because of the gospel he preached and was assassinated while he was serving

²¹ For more about him and his work, see: Burke, *The Ground Beneath the Cross*; Whitfield, *Paying the Price*; Ellacuría, "The Crucified People;" Lee, "Liberation Theology's Transcendent Moment;" Peter C. Phan, "Ignacio Ellacuría, SJ in Dialogue with Asian Theologians: What Can They Learn from Each Other?" *Horizons* 32:1 (2005): 53-71.

²² Wilhelm Garbers, "Rise Up."

²³ Read more about Romero: Romero, *The Violence of Love*; Walters, *Saint Oscar Romero*; "Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero." United Nations International Day for the Right to the Truth Concerning Gross Human Rights Violations and for the Dignity of Victims. Accessed April 20, 2018. <http://www.un.org/en/events/righttotruthday/romero.shtml>; James Brockman, *Romero: A Life* (New York: Orbis Books, 1989).

communion...literally shot as he holding up the body and blood of Christ. In the weeks prior to his death he had said: “If they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadoran people.”²⁴

I remember hearing this quote and thinking: “This is quite strange...he’s dead, how can/could he be resurrected amongst the people?” Yet, I’ll never forget the day on the 30th anniversary of his assassination when I walked down the street with over 200,000 people as we chanted together about resurrection life and I thought: “This is part of the witness of resurrection and precisely what he was taking about...that we *together* carry this resurrection promise in our lives, in the way that we live.”²⁵

This is a call to become a people of breath in our world. This breath re-orientes us to live in view of the resurrection. It was the work that clergy in the Twin Cities undertook in the days following George Floyd’s murder as we walked together in silent prayer. It has been the work in our church of reading and learning more about racism over these past two years so we can become more of a people who, following Sölle, learn to pay attention as we outcry and then move into action.

The call of the gospel is to rise up and become a people of breath like it is depicted in the musical *Hamilton*, a people who together sing: “If you livin' on your knees, you rise up. We ain't got no other choice, we need to rise up. Rise up! I am not throwing away my shot.”²⁶

I started thinking about this musical, and the story of the founding of our country, (and it) made me think about this passage and the early church in Corinth to whom Paul was writing because I mean what bunch of idiots (don’t worry, I’ll keep going!)—the founders of our nation were risking their entire lives, giving everything they had to believe in a vision of freedom, of hope, of the ability to vote, of rights. They believed in this vision and gave their lives to it.

Yes, we will, we will all go to sleep.

²⁴ The full quote is: “I have often been threatened with death. I must tell you, as a Christian, I do not believe in a death without resurrection. If am killed, I shall arise again in the Salvadoran people...You may say, if they succeed in killing me, that I pardon and bless those who do it. Would, indeed, that they might be convinced that they will waste their time. A bishop will die, but God’s church, which is the people, will never perish.” See: Brockman, *Romero*, 248.

²⁵ Wilhelm Garbers, "Rise Up."

²⁶ Miranda, "My Shot."

Death is part of all of our stories.

But the God of resurrection life holds and encounters us in the midst of that coming sleep...asking and inviting and challenging us to live in a way that bears witness to resurrection life. Calling us to be a people who will rise up, who will not throw away our shot to live in transformed ways of being until the very last moment when we have the breath in the bodies we know now. I Corinthians echoes through the centuries with a call even more radical than that of Hamilton...so will we be a people who will rise up and believe in this vision and give and live our lives so as to see it made real?

Yes, this isn't some pill that I can give you that fixes everything—which I wish I had. It's not a magic wand that rids us of injustice or suffering or cancer.

But maybe it's something more revolutionary than that. We will all go to sleep, but this resurrection life, this resurrection promise is that which will always have the final word.

So let us be a people who are willing to risk the terror of resurrection—who are willing to rise into the places we called to be...to be with and for one another, no matter what may be, and to bear witness to the risen Christ whose life fundamentally alters all human history, all political relationships, and all things.²⁷

People of the Promise | Covenant | *Chesed*

What about us? What about us?

What about all the times you said you had the answers?

So what about us?

What about all the broken happy ever afters?

Oh, what about us?

What about all the plans that ended in disaster?

Oh, what about love? What about trust?

What about us? What about us?

—P!nk, “What About Us?”²⁸

²⁷ Christine M. Smith in *Risking the Terror: Resurrection in this Life* writes: “Resurrection as process, not moment; resurrection as neighborhood and community transformation; resurrection as bodily integrity; resurrection as a refusal to play cards with the jailer; resurrection as resistance and insurrection; resurrection as coming out; resurrection as remembrance and presence; and resurrection as that which we practice...may these images lead us to claim and name every conceivable expression of resurrection life among us.” Smith, *Risking the Terror*: 113. See: Wilhelm Garbers, “Rise Up.”

²⁸ P!nk, “What About Us?” track 4 on *Beautiful Trauma*, RCA, 2017, compact disc (CD).

Another way that I have helped us cultivate the communal formation necessary to be a people of breath is through uplifting the call to the church to be a “people of promise” who live in covenant relationship/faithfulness of loving-kindness (*chesed*) with God and with one another. It is this promise that calls us to breathe and become a people of breath in the world. And what does it mean to be a people of promise? It is a reminder that we do not exist for ourselves alone, but as was true of Israel, we are called that we might then live in the world as people of the promise and covenant in the world. As Genesis 12 recounts of the call of Abram, we are to blessed to be a blessing to others, understood politically as we must be a people of breath in our time:

Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you, I will curse. And in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”²⁹

I preached about what it means to be a people of promise in September 2020. I highlight that, indeed, the promise of Genesis 12 is not just for Abram or even Sarai...

No, indeed the promise is for everyone. This is where even with our Blessing Initiative, the reason it was thus named was on account of our desire to be a people who live out of the overflow of grace in our lives who, as we ourselves have known the goodness of what it means to journey with God, we live with our hands open in generosity because we know none of this was ever ours to control anyway. We are blessed; we know what it means is to be a people who are changed, transformed, and know the goodness of walking with God in the garden...and we then are to live from the overflow of that knowing. That is our invitation: to live from the place where we have known God's showing up in our lives. That is the promise, a promise that is for all the people as we ourselves live and know that promise for ourselves.

....

And so as we are seeking to be the church, to be a people who live our lives connected to the God of the whole of all of the stories, we want to be a people of promise, a people who remind each other that God isn't done with any of us yet, and that this blessing, that

²⁹ Genesis 12:1-2 (NRSV).

the goodness of a life lived without the trappings of ego and self-protection and all of these things is ours. Through the promise, we're invited into freedom, to walk with God and one another as we were intended to and to be people who generously extend that promise and invitation and good news, as we live it with one another and with the world.³⁰

This promise and covenant shapes both our relationship with God, and how we then show up in the world, but it is also a call to how we are to do life with one another.

But sometimes we also forget. Our lives get busy and hurried. We make frozen pizza one too many times in a week. Guilty! We forget that we ourselves are welcome at the table. We don't bring our full selves. We try to sit in chairs that were never meant for us. Sometimes we just really want to overturn the table because we don't want to sit with one another anymore. And yet God's Spirit shows up and continues to invite and remind and challenge us, as is happening here in 1 Corinthians 11, to remember what the table is for. For here in the early church, the people had indeed likewise forgotten. And though they didn't have frozen pizza, they lived in a world that not unlike ours was also divided, divided by social class and hierarchies, divided by identities, divided in all the ways humans have always figured out how to divide ourselves one from another.

They brought that same knowing, that same way of remembering to the table. Where here as they gathered it seems that what would happen at that time in the Greco-Roman world is you would have the host of the gathering and then their friends, those of the most class affiliated with them, they would be seated right one with another. The best wine and the best food would go to them. But at that same table, there were others who were hungry. In this early church, they had forgotten that YHWH had called them not to remember the ways of old or the ways of their world, but the ways YHWH. The ways of God in Jesus Christ as we gather at that table in the new covenant is supposed to be a place where there is nourishment equally for all of our beings and our souls.³¹

We forget that this table and covenant and promise is not just for us, as did the Israelites, as did the early Church. As Paul's letter to the Corinthians notes: the people had forgotten that the table was for everyone.

But this table isn't just for Sundays. This is the table of our lives. Friends, we are a part of a family of God. At this table, there is a chair for each of us. And there is a chair for everyone. We are called and invited to walk into the light of the candles of the spirit

³⁰ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, "People of the Promise," sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, September 20, 2020, <https://sarawg.com/2020/09/20/peopleofpromise/>.

³¹ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, "Gathered at the Table," sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, January 17, 2021, <https://sarawg.com/2021/01/17/gathered-at-the-table-a-sermon-on-i-corinthians-1117-31/>

which illuminates all of the stuff of our lives. We are called then to share that and to love and to grieve and to pray and to hope and to remember this Jesus. Sometimes coming to the table can be scary and hard. Sometimes we don't want to gather with one another. And yet Jesus, who sits at the head of the table, calls lovingly to each of us. "Remember, I have a seat for you. There is no one excluded, no one uninvited. There is a place for you here."³²

We are a people of the promise, a people shaped by and called to covenant, and as such we are a people called to live out *chesed*—the Hebrew word whose meaning ranges from kindness or love between people, specifically of the devotional piety of people toward God as well as of love or mercy of God toward humanity. In Jewish ethics it is charity or love between people.³³ It is often translated as “steadfast love,” “loving-kindness,” “faithfulness,” or (as I’ll employ here) “loving covenant obligation.”³⁴ I preached on this theme two different times, both May 3rd and May 10th in a mini-series within a series (the series was "Grace Actually..." and I preached both sermons on the book of Ruth) as a way of bringing together these conceptions of being a "people of promise" who live in view of covenant with God and one another.³⁵

³² Wilhelm Garbers, “Gathered at the Table.”

³³ Note: in Jewish ethics, *chesed* is one of the central virtues. See, for instance: Gordon Clark, *The Word Hesed in the Hebrew Bible (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement, 157)* (Sheffield, England: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Press, 1993); Robin Routledge, “Hesed as Obligation: A Re-Examination,” *TynBul* 46 (1995), 179-96; Pascal Koroth, “Hesed-Spirituality of the Family of Ruth,” *BibleBhashyam* 17 (1991), 146-60; Katharine Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978); Harold Fisch, “Ruth and the Structure of Covenant History,” *Vetus Testamentum* 32, no. 4 (1982): 425–437. Brian M. Britt, “Unexpected Attachments: A Literary Approach to the Term ‘Chesed’ in the Hebrew Bible,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 27, no. 3 (2003): 289–307. Rami Shapiro, *Amazing Chesed: Living a Grace-Filled Judaism* (Woodstock, VT Jewish Lights Publishing, 2013).

³⁴ I take this from political theorist Daniel Elazar. Daniel Elazar, *Covenant and Constitutionalism: The Covenant Tradition in Politics*, vol. 3, *Covenant Traditions in Politics Series* (New York: Routledge, 1993): 23.

³⁵ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, “Grace Actually Makes Us Bold,” sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, May 3, 2020, <https://sarawg.com/2020/05/03/graceactuallybold/>. Also: Sara Wilhelm Garbers, “Grace Actually Restores,” sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, May 10, 2020, <https://sarawg.com/2020/05/10/gracerestores/>.

I preached this sermon nearly two months into the shutdown due to COVID-19. We had figured out completely new ways of being church: worshiping online, moving all of our groups to virtual zoom gatherings, and working to encourage and empower the community. At this moment there was a sense that we had figured out the worst of it—that Jesus had risen again in Easter, and we were doing the thing. Little did we know that this was, of course, only weeks before George Floyd was killed, and the world blew up and our city started burning, and the COVID-19 pandemic would deeply impact us up until today.

Through the story of these women, women who were asking and embodying questions about what it means to live with open hands toward the world amid our fears and the real vulnerabilities, I am aware that the journey to becoming a people of promise involves loss and relinquishing of collective norms that have kept us safe and given us meaning. This is part of the challenge to white people and to a church like mine: we have to do the inner communal work to acknowledge our power and collective privilege, to interrogate our norms and stories in order that we might become more aware of how they form us and keep us from becoming a people of breath in the world.

The story of Ruth can assist in this work. Ruth is not “us.” Ruth is neither an Israelite nor a person of power. She is a woman, she is a foreigner, and she is from the hated outsiders. This story then presents a counternarrative to the xenophobic witnesses of the Hebrew Bible itself...and in so doing offers up a vision for being to us as a church that calls us to live a story other than the story of white evangelicalism in the United States— a call to us corporately to live as a people of the promise and re-encounter the gospel and new life that comes through a woman, an outsider. As I explain in the sermon:

(T)his story is named after Ruth, a foreigner Moabite woman. So spoiler alert: Ruth the Moabite (as the text says again and again in case you forget), she's a Moabite in case you forgot, well—she's still a Moabite. Anyway... spoiler alert, Ruth begets Obed and Obed begets Jesse, and Jesse begets David. Okay. So I'm not really great at math, but I'm pretty sure that is only about three generations. The leader of all of Israel—the one after God's own heart, David, is a Moabite and should be forbidden from worship! But one of the things about the Jewish Canon related to these writings and scrolls is that what it represents and reminds us of is that within the tradition of Judaism there has always been a pluralistic way of understanding what it means to be the people of God. And so, one of the thoughts about when this text was written is it may have been written as a or a counter-witness to the xenophobic texts written against the Moabites, and in-particular Ezra-Nehemiah, which emphatically states that you cannot marry outsiders. Thus, some scholars think that Ruth may be a counterpoint to that witness. Alternatively, other scholars think that Ruth is seeking to argue in favor of the Davidic legacy by naming one with Moabite heritage as the embodiment of *chesed* loyalty.

Either way, whenever it was written, edited, and compiled, we know for sure that this story is present in our canon and that it's utilized both in the history of Jewish worship and in rabbinical understanding to tell the story of what it actually means to be *chesed*, faithful.³⁶

This is part of what I've come to love about Ruth; it presents an alternative story for how we can live in the world. As the opening text of Ruth notes, this story occurs during the time of the Judges. This is the time in Israel's history where, according to the book of Judges, there was infighting amongst the tribes; the 12 different tribes who were newly in the land that God had promised them (land that was supposed to bring their freedom) and they were trying to figure out how to orient themselves, but there was inter-tribal violence and some of the Judges who ruled them were incredibly unjust and violent. Not only this, but at the end of the book of Judges, horrific violence transpires, particularly focused against women. For, as Judges notes: "In that time, Israel had no King and everyone did as they saw fit." Yet, at the time when the Judges ruled, a counter-witness is found in Naomi and Ruth. Likewise, in this sermon I am wanting to press the community to ask which story we are going to live—are we going to live the story of

³⁶ Wilhelm Garbers, "Grace Actually Makes Us Bold."

power politics and maintenance of power or are we going to live the story of *chesed* as we seek to be people of life and breath in the world?

Turning to the Jewish faith, its history of interpretation of Ruth, and how the book features both in the Hebrew Bible's canon and in their liturgical calendar, enhances my own, Christian reading.³⁷ Ruth is the central text for the Festival of Weeks (Shavot) when the people gather together to remember God's gift of the Torah, and remember the way that God relates to God's people. In the Jewish history and community, Ruth is heralded as an example of it looks like to live as a people who are faithful to the covenant, making clear what it means to be people who embody the law that is intended to enable God's people to be in right relationship with God, with one another, with the land, and with all people. And so this story bears witness to *chesed*, faithfulness to God, to the covenant, and to one another.

It is *chesed* that is our ethical call and grounding teleological vision—the call to be a people who live *chesed* and embody it; to be a people whose lives tell the story of what it means to truly live in that covenantal relationship with God and one another. This is the story about what happens in the real of our lives—at dinner tables and in familial relationships—in times of

³⁷ In the Jewish scriptures, this book sits in a different place than it does in the Christian Canon. In Christian Bibles the book of Ruth immediately follows Judges because it is historically right set in the time of the Judges. However, in the Jewish Canon, Ruth is a part of the third section of their texts known as “The Writings” and within the writings there is a subset of books where there are the Five Scrolls of Megillot. Importantly, these five scrolls shape the liturgical calendar for the Jewish faith. And the book of Ruth is read during the Festival of Weeks (Shavot). See: Annette Schellenberg, “Megillot,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/obso/9780199858699.001.0001/acref-9780199858699-e-154?rskey=eakSa7&result=1>. For more on Shavu'ot, see: Adele Berlin, “Shavu'ot,” *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199730049.001.0001/acref-9780199730049-e-2863?rskey=iFnjzj&result=1>; Philip Goodman, *The Shavuot Anthology* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1974).

conquest and warring kingdoms. This story reminds us of our own histories of being sojourners— not being made a people of noble birth or human wisdom (I Corinthians 1:26) but a people who have lived as foreigners, who are now grafted into the family of God and God’s promises.

It is a story of calling God to account—of challenging God to make good on God’s promises to the people—it is a story about community and naming oneself so that one is recognized and restored to right relationship in one’s community. It is the story of continuing to breathe and choose one another even when everything tells us to pick only ourselves, it is about the healing that happens when we show up for one another.

In turning to images and conceptions for Christian community such as the call to be a resurrection people or the call to be a people of promise to live covenantal love and faithfulness, I invite us to be shaped by a story other than that of American Christian Nationalism and its deification of white settler history and to, instead, be formed by the story of the early church and turn toward our neighbors in solidarity and love so that we might be a people of breath in the world.

Neighbor Love | Care for the Stranger

For some shiver
 For some whispered words
 And the promise to come
 And you saw me low
 Alone again
 Didn't they say that only love will win in the end

—Mumford & Sons “Only Love”³⁸

³⁸ Mumford & Sons, “Only Love,” track 11 on *Wilder Mind*, AIR Studios, 2015, compact disc (CD).

In many ways, the call to embody the greatest commandments to love God and love neighbor, to care for the stranger, and the call to care for the common good (or, in the language of our theme for the church calendar 2019-2020 “The Year of the Good Neighbor”) has already been named in the call to be a Resurrection People and a People of Promise, for the formational call to be the church and become a people is, at its core something that can only be realized as it is embodied and reflected in the practices of solidarity, covenant faithfulness, and love of neighbor as we seek to be a people of breath. Yet I still want to name intentionally the themes of neighbor love, common good, and care for the stranger if for no other reason than to make clear that social teleological ethics are not just about our internal moral formation as a community, but that our formation is a call to be that type of community in the world. For, indeed, the church cannot be the church if it exists for and onto itself. No, to be the church results in the making of a people who show up and live in the world in such a way that they, collectively embody resurrection life and the promise in ways that we are actually good news for our neighbors and our world.³⁹

Over and over again I challenge our community that it does not matter in the end how we perceive ourselves. We might think we are an amazing community of life; we might believe we are loving our neighbors; but if our neighbors do not name that they experience us as a people of breath and life then we are not that. This is central to a part of the conflict we encountered as a

³⁹ As Christian Collins Winn noted in "Building Bridges for our Future: "To be the church is to be a people on the move. Through the power of the Spirit, God calls the church together, builds up the community, and then sets the community on the path of discipleship which inevitably leads out into the world where the living Christ is already present as the source of love, truth, and life who animates the whole inhabited earth. Like her Lord, the church-community ultimately does not exist for herself; rather, she exists to be a true and good neighbor, and a genuine witness in word and deed to the love of God revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ." Winn, "Building Bridges," 1. See Appendix E.

community as we wrestled with changing our name: the majority of the people who voted *against* changing our name would say things like, “No one I know has a problem with the name,” or “The name isn’t racist to me.” Yet when not only our neighbors, but people in the congregation articulated that the name Colonial was problematic, they refuse to be ruptured by this accounting and dismissed any potential concerns with the name as being leftist agendas on the part of “woke” external agitators.⁴⁰ Still, the call to be the church and be experienced as loving by our neighbors remains.

This is reflective of the operation of American Christian Nationalism in our time: care for the neighbor and the stranger is repudiated as agendas of political leftists. Thus, in seeking to form a Christian community who can counter the operation of American Christian Nationalism, I frequently preach about the call to the church to be known by our love and to live this as neighbor love that acts toward supporting the flourishing of our neighbor. An example of this is a sermon I preached in the fall of 2019 as a part of our programming theme for the year: “The Year of the Good Neighbor.” All of our sermons and programming were focused particularly in aiding us in considering and leaning into becoming good neighbors not in theory but in actuality. I turned to Deuteronomy 10:12-22 which, in part, reads:

Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow,

⁴⁰ For instance, in the paper that Christian Collins Winn wrote as a part of the name change process, he highlighted feedback a few of us received when we posted about our church’s name on social media, asking: “What do you think of when you hear the word ‘Colonial’?” The responses we received included:

- “I think of colonization. I think of colonial rule which is power rooted in controlling and taking...dehumanizing,” Genevieve, 25
- “A country is under the control of another”- Richard, 63.

For these and more see: Winn, “Building Bridges,” 18.

and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.⁴¹

I implored the church to refuse the partisan politics of our time and lean into what it means to be the Church, to be a people who are shaped by the call to love our neighbors as we love and are loved by God. To try and uplift the urgency of this call to neighbor love and call to love the stranger, foreigner, widow, poor and orphan in our midst, I turned to a biblical defense, quoting more than ten passages from the Bible about care for the neighbor, the foreigner, the migrant, and the widow, asking:

What does it mean that we are called throughout Scripture to care for the widow, the orphan, the stranger?

Sometimes we can too easily conflate these calls into particular partisan positions...but please, let's be intentional about letting the Gospel and the good news of this life that Christ calls us to, to offer us invitation, reminder, and critique.

We aren't going to agree about what to do about borders. We aren't going to agree about a whole lot of things. When in the life of this church have we ever agreed about everything? We disagree. GREAT! Welcome to community! Welcome to being in relationship.

It is through this wrestling that we can become better, right? Iron sharpens iron. So let's be better Christians together.

Let's be people who wrestle with these texts, acknowledging that there are some positions that can't be defended. As a Christ-follower; I don't get to say: "Kill everybody." Not an option, folks. I would pretty much have to throw out all of the Bible if I say that.

We are called to love the stranger. We are called to love the widow (and widower). We are called to love the orphan. Scripture makes this clear. I mean we could go on for quite a while here. We could talk about...⁴²

Then, in the days following the failed vote to change our name (learned on January 20, 2021), reeling with grief, anger, pain, and feeling lost and unsure about how to lead forward when the

⁴¹ Deuteronomy 10:12-22 (NRSV).

⁴² Sara Wilhelm Garbers, "Strangers in the Land," sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, September 29, 2019, <https://sarawg.com/2019/09/30/strangers-in-the-land/>. I referenced: Colossians 3:11; Hebrews 11:1-3; Matthew 25:40; Luke 10:27; Zechariah 7:9-10; Ezekiel 47:22; Psalm 146:9; I Chronicles 16:19-22; Leviticus 19:34; Deuteronomy 10:19; Leviticus 27:19; Job 29:15-17; Jeremiah 7:5-7; Matthew 25:35; Romans 13:10.

community rejected this clear summons/appeal to change our name, I again came back to this theme and call to be the church by actually loving our neighbors in a sermon entitled “Gathered for the Neighborhood.”⁴³ I do so by challenging us to “remember the plot line.”

As we wrap up this series about what it means to be the gathered community, we began by talking about how we are gathered by Christ. And we end by saying, we are gathered for the neighborhood. This not only is the truth of Congregationalism and our call to be the church, but it is fundamentally the call to be Christian. As we have affirmed that we know in Scripture, the greatest commandments that Jesus issued is to love God with all we are and to love our neighbor as ourselves. We are gathered by Christ; we are gathered for the neighborhood. If we do not live gathered by Christ, loving God, then we are not Christian. But also if we live gathered by Christ, but we lose the plot line and we forget that we are gathered for the neighborhood, we have forgotten that these things always go together, because the story and the through line of God's work is always love. It's always Shalom. It's always healing. . . .

(Yet sometimes we) lose the plot line. We forget that this community is always gathered by Christ and gathered for the neighborhood, gathered to be about the spirit and the table and the word, all of these things of life. And yet the call of Christ remains to each of us as individuals, as a church, as a community, as Christians ourselves, to be a people indeed who live God's story of love, who embody the good news one to another...

(The Good News) is a story to pick up our pens and to write God's stories through our lives, through this community, to be a people who are not just the gathered community for no reason, but a gathered community who are gathered by Christ and gathered for the neighborhood. Might we indeed not lose this plot line. May we remind each other that this is our story, that this is our song. As I shared this summer, a quote from Martin Luther from his 1520 piece on Freedom of the Christian, he writes, “We conclude therefore that the Christian lives not in themselves, but in Christ and in their neighbor. Otherwise they are not Christian.”⁴⁴ We live in Christ and in our neighbor. That dual call to love is what makes us Christian. It changes our story, allows us to write narratives that are filled with freedom and love and grace. But here's the thing friends. We get to choose. Our life is one choice after another.

What will we write? What will be the legacy and the narrative? Will we remember the plot line? Will we remember who we are: our name and our colors and our foods and the things that make us, us, living in the beauty and the wonder of grace? As one of our denominational affiliations has as their saying, “God is still speaking...” God is not done with us yet. And as we are in the precipice of our 75th anniversary, the question before us is, what story will we write in this next chapter? What story will we join God as God is in the business of writing a story, as we pray every week that God's

⁴³ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, “Gathered for the Neighborhood,” sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, February 14, 2021, <https://sarawg.com/2021/02/14/gathered-for-the-neighborhood-a-sermon-on-ephesians-31-10-14-21/>.

⁴⁴ Martin Luther, “Freedom of the Christian,” 80.

kingdom would come here on Earth as it is in heaven? [...] Let us be the church and let us be gathered for the neighborhood.⁴⁵

The Flourishing Life Discovered in Freedom

Freedom, Freedom
 I can't move
 Freedom, cut me loose
 Singin', freedom, freedom
 Where are you?
 'Cause I need freedom, too

—Beyoncé, “Freedom”⁴⁶

The final aspect of a social teleological ethics that I highlight is how flourishing life is discovered in freedom—the freedom to breathe and to be. Here I explore the ways in which freedom calls to, invites us, and is the central effort and purpose of the church: to be a people who aid others in getting free as we ourselves get free—to ring the bells of freedom, to break the chains, and to proclaim the good news of Jesus to the world. More than anything, I want the church to discover its own freedom from a past and hauntings that have kept us stuck so that we might be the church in our time and be a people who bring freedom and breath to a world held in the bounds of trenchant oppression, racism, sexism, and violence of all forms.

On MLK Sunday on January 19, 2020, I preached a sermon entitled: “The I AM.”⁴⁷ If only I had known then or possibly apprehended the ramifications of what was coming in 2020. But on the day that I preached this sermon I only knew a few things: (1) That we had called a special meeting for a church vote on February 23rd to consider Jeff Lindsay for our new Senior

⁴⁵ Wilhelm Garbers, “Gathered for the Neighborhood.”

⁴⁶ Beyoncé, “Freedom,” track 10 on *Lemonade*, Parkwood, 2016, compact disc (cd).

⁴⁷ Wilhelm Garbers, “The I AM.”

Minister; (2) That we were on the precipice of a new chapter in the life of the congregation; (3) That it was MLK Sunday; (4) That we were in an election year where we would be deciding as a nation if we would re-elect Donald Trump as president. Things I had no idea about: (1) that in a month and a half we would suspend all in-person worship and gatherings during COVID; (2) That over 1 million people thus far would die in the United States on account COVID, let alone that I would still be worried about COVID over two years later;⁴⁸ (3) That George Floyd would be killed in Minneapolis, igniting international calls for racial justice and reckoning; (4) That our community would ask its members to change our name in order to better align and position ourselves to be agents of reconciliation and to build for a possible new future; and (5) that in in seven short months hence, we would launch an alternative worship service where we would actually sing Beyonce's "Freedom" as one of the worship songs.

I began this sermon as I do many, with music. As I have noted throughout this dissertation, music and poetry are central to my ethical imagination, formation, and thinking. And that was true no less for this sermon as I played Beyoncé's "Freedom" on repeat and began the sermon by playing part of the song with the lyrics on the screen.

As we began this New Year, we moved more deeply into our theme for the 2019-2020 "Year of the Good Neighbor." Our series in the new part of the year was to root the community of what happens when God (love) moves into our neighborhood. Rooted in *The Message's* paraphrase of John 1:14, "The Word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood."⁴⁹

⁴⁸ As of the time of submission of this dissertation (June 2022), the current COVID-19 death toll is over one million in the United States. See: "COVID Data Tracker," Center for Disease Control, June 27, 2022, <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#datatracker-home>.

⁴⁹ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: the Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2005).

Over those earliest weeks of 2020, we considered each word of that passage in the sermons, dividing them into weekly explorations of: “The word,” “Became”, “Flesh,” considering the biblical conception of each word, while wedding them with one of our core values in order to ground the community in our collective identity and markers as people who embrace our core values.⁵⁰

On this MLK Sunday, I connected God’s long arc of freedom and shalom with the work of the Civil Rights movement and MLK’s vision of the beloved community.⁵¹ For me, it is a sense our work is the building of the beloved community and the conditions of its possibility—a space where all people are able to live and be and flourish.

As I noted in the previous chapter, God as the I AM, the “ground of being” is the source, the place of all life where we are invited to find our connection to true life and being. John signals that Jesus is God, that in Jesus is Emmanuel, God-with-us. This reality alters not only our individual becoming, but also our collective being/becoming a people, and shapes our way of being Church in the world.⁵² In the sermon I note how Moses serves as a paradigm and prophet of God’s freedom:

(W)ith the call of Moses, he becomes a paradigm and a prophet of God’s freedom. God has heard the cries of God’s people who are enslaved and then calls to Moses (who’s an unlikely hero!) to say, “It’s you that I want to help bring my people to freedom!” In this way, Moses is the first prophet of freedom, Jesus is both the second Moses plus the I AM become flesh, and MLK is another Moses, inviting the people out of oppression and into God’s freedom.⁵³

⁵⁰ See: Appendix D.

⁵¹ Which I will discuss in the next chapter.

⁵² My work here is deeply connected and indebted to the legacy of black abolitionists, civil rights advocates and all who work and labor for freedom.

⁵³ Wilhelm Garbers, “The I AM.”

Jesus as the second Moses, invites the people into freedom. In the sermon I connect the work of Jesus with the work of MLK and the Civil Rights leaders, locating this legacy as part of my efforts to call to the community into a vision of social. So here I revisit my first sermon that I preached while on staff by referencing the mountain, Mount Horeb (which most scholars think is the same mountain by another name: Mount Sinai). Mount Horeb/Sinai was known as the place where God dwelt, the mountain of God, a.k.a. YHWH's place. This is where Moses will receive the plan for the tabernacle, this is the place where the Israelites will worship God, this is where the Ten Commandments are given by God to the people. This mountain features as a prominent place throughout the life of God's people. And it is here, at this place, that Moses is first encountered by God in this burning bush, this sacred mountain where the divine dwells.

In the ANE world, mountains were thought to be the locations where the divine resided. As I noted in that first sermon about Jesus' meeting of the woman at the well, she says to him: "You Jewish people say we must worship God on this mountain but we Samaritans, we worship on this mountain?" And Jesus then says, "No, it's no longer on mountains where people must worship for now the time is where all people will worship in spirit and in truth."⁵⁴

This is the call to become a people—a people who worship in Spirit and in truth— and this call makes us a people who then live differently in the world as the people of YHWH a people who remove our sandals and come home, a people who live in view of the I AM. This self-understanding has been a necessary part of the Black church in the United States, oriented to care of the real of their congregants' lives, reminding them of the freedom that grounds the

⁵⁴ John 4:20-21 (paraphrase).

vision of God's desire for them— is both a location for resistance and persistence. In this sermon, I urge the congregation to remember a part of the call to become a people that has often been ignored by the white church in America—disrupting a privatized gospel, instead casting a vision of the promised land and the cry of freedom as our collective work on behalf of not only ourselves, but all of our neighbors. As I note:

And we as God's people, following the I AM who has encountered us have likewise become radically changed, for we have found ourselves at home in the presence of the I AM and we are invited to take off our sandals and be at home in God that we might likewise, be people and prophets and midwives and sisters and stewards of freedom, creating more of God's kingdom here on earth indeed, as it is in heaven.⁵⁵

I then turn to MLK's final sermon "I've Been to the Mountaintop," and played part of it for the congregation.⁵⁶ It entails a yearning for freedom which MLK himself would not see being realized. But this yearning and call for freedom is ingrained in Christianity through its Black Church. And therefore, we need to listen to their voices.

We first see the people call out to God when they are enslaved –they long and cry for freedom. God utilizes Moses and encounters Moses as the I AM and they move to freedom. And then Jesus comes, as the human form of God, leading us to freedom. He calls out to us: "Follow me into the truth and the promised land of where you were meant to dwell!" And Martin Luther King shows up in the 1960s following in that tradition to say: "We are called to be a people of freedom, to be a people who both in our spiritual lives and in our embodied lives together, march and move toward freedom!"⁵⁷

Likewise, my dream for this community is that as we take off our own sandals and find ourselves at home so that we would then

Put them back on and go down to do people who are crying out and do the work in the neighborhood that I've called you to be...a people who midwife freedom, a people who are prophets of freedom, a people who are mothers and daughters and sons and friends

⁵⁵ Wilhelm Garbers, "The I AM."

⁵⁶ King, "I've Been to the Mountaintop."

⁵⁷ Wilhelm Garbers, "The I AM."

and neighbors who bear witness to that mountain of God's freedom, a people who say, "I see that promised land. God's kingdom is coming. It's not yet, but I know it's real and I want to live my life oriented to that mountain."⁵⁸

This is the work and the vision of a kingdom of freedom for all of us where there is freedom for everyone:

Might we indeed be a people who join you in your becoming flesh to become humans made in your image, formed by your love as the great I AM, to then indeed be the people of your freedom and good news in this world and all of our neighbors. For it's by your Spirit and your great love...not by power, nor by might, that we indeed cry FREEDOM. AMEN.⁵⁹

This is the vision of when love moves into the neighborhood: we are a people who move together in the rhythm of love, and march together and work together seeing and working for freedom for all. This aim that we might become such a people as this church in Edina, Minnesota, in spite of the opposing forces and voices that would rather us stay stuck in white supremacy and the reach for power politics. This is central to my vision and prayers as a pastor....indeed, might freedom ring. As I concluded in my closing prayer:

God, we give you thanks for the ways in which you encounter and join with real people to bring about your freedom, your light, your good news, and your life. So God, even now as you hear the cries of both our hearts and the cries of our siblings around the world, God, may we be willing to take off our sandals and let you love and change and transform us, that our fears or our excuses or insecurities aren't going to have voice in the face of your great love that says, "I'm asking you to lead anyway. I'm asking you to love anyway. I'm asking you to move anyway." So might we indeed be a people who join you in your becoming flesh to become humans made in your image, formed by your love as the great I AM, to then indeed be the people of your freedom and good news in this world and all of our neighbors. For it's by your Spirit and your great love...not by power, nor by might, that we indeed cry FREEDOM. AMEN.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Social Teleological Ethics and Becoming a People of Breath

As I reflect on my vision for a communal/social teleological ethics of formation that is an ethics of breath, I am struck by the labor it has been to foster this vision in the community. To me, the call to breath is central to the Christian vision and the call to be the church, and it literally knocked the breath out of me when our first attempt to change our name failed.

Intellectually, I understand how/why this is the case, and I have been deeply grateful for the books that I have been able to read along with some in the community over this past year as a part of our Faith & Justice forums. Together we have read books about racism, wrestling with what this asks of us as a community of faith. From *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* to James Cone's *The Cross & The Lynching Tree* to *The Color of Law* to *White Too Long* to *Stand Your Ground* to *I'm Still Here* to *The Fire Next Time*,⁶¹ I have been grateful for how these books have deepened my and some in the community's understanding of systemic racism particularly against black people and the formation of white supremacy, especially in the church.

And yet the full refusal to engage and the anger and rage of some of the congregation members stupefied me—leaving me disoriented and grieving. I lamented at what I named as “the failure of formation.” For what happens and what is a church if it cannot embody the basics of being a community and force of breath in our world? Who are we if we refuse the resurrection as a challenge to be people who love our neighbors and work for freedom?

⁶¹ Reynolds and Kendi, *Stamped*. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Rothstein, *The Color of Law*. Jones, *White Too Long*. Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*. Austin Channing Brown, *I'm Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness* (New York: Convergent, 2018). James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, reissue edition (New York: Vintage, 1992). We read these books and watched films starting in June following the murder of George Floyd. We would host podcast conversations about the books and then had book discussions with the community.

Following the failure of the vote in January 2021, I took much time to grieve, process, rest, rage, and heal. I carry all of this in my body still as I continue this work, for as I look to the legacy of the cloud of witnesses who have long called the church to be the church, I know that the work is never fully realized nor may it be...but this does not make it a failure, it makes it pregnant with liminal possibility like the life known in a mustard seed. For as the prayer reminds us: “We are prophets of a future not our own.”⁶² The church did end up voting a second time in December of 2021 to change our name.⁶³ And still the work and call remains before us to become a people of breath that we might live as a resurrection people, a people of promise who are

⁶² I am reminded here of the prayer that is often attributed to Oscar Romero: “Prophets of a Future Not our Own.” Note: I first encountered this prayer while preparing for an immersion trip on global justice through United Seminary (Spring 2011), and it was attributed to Oscar Romero. It seems, however, that this was a misrepresentation as (according to the UCCB and other sources) the prayer was first presented by Cardinal Dearden in 1979 and quoted by Pope Francis in 2015. This reflection is an excerpt from a homily written for Cardinal Dearden by then-Fr. Ken Untener on the occasion of the Mass for Deceased Priests, October 25, 1979. Pope Francis quoted Cardinal Dearden in his remarks to the Roman Curia on December 21, 2015. Fr. Untener was named bishop of Saginaw, Michigan, in 1980. See: Cardinal Dearden, “Prophets of a Future Not Our Own,” June 3, 2022, <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/prayers/prophets-of-a-future-not-our-own>. Interestingly, Pope Francis employs the prayer in his Christmas Address to the Roman Curia in December of 2015...challenging them to lead and be faithful to their call to the gospel and to be a part of a church that is always reforming and being reformed. See: Pope Francis, “Presentation of the Christmas Greetings to the Roman Curia,” homily given at Clementine Hall, Vatican City, Italy, December 21, 2015, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/december/documents/papa-francesco_20151221_curia-romana.html.

⁶³ This process came about because our first process transpired during the time of COVID where we were unable to meet together and some of those who voted no (when surveyed) said that the first process was too staff driven and also not congregational in that we were unable to meet together and so 118 members from the community put together a petition in Spring of 2021 for us to take up considering an actual new name. The vote to put together a task force to identify a new name passed with 89%. The task force then underwent a process and finally put forward their name recommendation: Meetinghouse Church. This is a many layered story, but part of what was going on with the failure of the first vote is that the membership rolls had not been cleaned for nearly a decade and on account of COVID ballots were sent to everyone in our database and more than 200 votes came in before we ever had our Congregational Meeting with votes from people who hadn’t even been to the church in 10+ years but were upset about us trying to change our name. The second vote reflected more of the opinion of the current congregation and includes some who changed their mind over the year of our working to change our name. For more on the name change see: Erica Pearson, “Many Minnesota Churches are Putting their Faith in New Names,” *Star Tribune* (June 18, 2022), <https://m.startribune.com/many-minnesota-churches-are-changing-their-names-to-appeal-to-millennials/600182960/?clmob=y&c=n&clmob=y&c=n>.

earnestly committed to loving ourselves, our neighbors, and the stranger; that all might have enough to breathe; that all might have the flourishing life where they are truly free.

Every night I lie in bed
The brightest colours fill my head
A million dreams are keeping me awake
A million dreams, a million dreams
I think of what the world could be
A vision of the one I see
A million dreams is all it's gonna take
A million dreams for the world we're gonna make
For the world we're gonna make

—P!nk “A Million Dreams”⁶⁴

⁶⁴ P!nk, “A Million Dreams,” track 2 on *The Greatest Showman: Reimagined*, Atlantic, 2017, compact disc (cd).

CHAPTER EIGHT

INDIVIDUAL DEONTOLOGICAL ETHICS:

THE OUGHT THAT OUGHT TO BE

I will have to die for this I fear
There's rage and terror and there's sickness here
I fight because I have to
I fight for us to know this truth

There's not enough rope to tie me down
There's not enough tape to shut this mouth
The stones you throw can make me bleed
But I won't stop until we're free
Wild hearts can't be broken
No, wild hearts can't be broken

—P!nk, “Wild Hearts Can’t Be Broken”¹

Introduction

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. For 9 minutes and 29 seconds Officer Chauvin knelt on Floyd’s neck. As Floyd breathed his last strangulated breath his words were, “I can’t breathe.”² If the last chapter was about the call of the church to be a people of breath, to be a people who help to foster the conditions necessary for breath and flourishing life, then in this chapter the horror at the heart of American Christian Nationalism is laid bare. By turning to deontological individual ethics, American Christian

¹ P!nk, “Wild Hearts Can’t Be Broken,” track 4 on *Beautiful Trauma*, RCA, 2017, compact disc (CD).

² “Killing of George Floyd.” *Wikipedia*. Accessed March 2, 2021.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Killing_of_George_Floyd.

Nationalism is exposed for the ways in which it both historically and currently makes for a world where people literally cannot breathe; it is a world where rights and human dignity are not equally upheld, a world where moral duties and obligations to them as persons are denied.³

In the wake of Floyd's murder, not only was racial consciousness awakened world-wide, but here in our city a fire was lit and began to burn—a reckoning of sorts.⁴ As I noted in the introduction, so much of the story of my state and white people here has been that we are nice progressive place.⁵ And yet, when one looks at racial disparities and actually tends to the history, it is clear that the story of progressive white values in Minnesota covers over more nefarious and violent truths.⁶ For it was here in this city where native persons were lynched and murdered and forcibly exiled. It was here where native land was stolen, it was here that black men were lynched in Duluth.⁷ It was here where there were also racial covenants and exclusions of people of

³ See, for instance: Gerald F. Gaus, “What Is Deontology? Part One: Orthodox Views,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 35, no. 1 (2001): 27–42; Gerald F. Gaus, “What Is Deontology? Part Two, Reasons to Act,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2001): 179–193; John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999); David Copp, *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Nancy (Ann) Davis, “Contemporary Deontology,” in *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. by Peter Singer (Oxford: Blackwell: 1991); Christoph Hübenal, “Deontology,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/obso/9780199829910.001.0001/acref-9780199829910-e-60?rskey=aioj5s&result=1>.

⁴ Yassmin Abdel-Magied, “Why the Protests in the U.S. Are an Awakening for Non-Black People Around the World,” *Time* (June 5, 2020): <https://time.com/5848914/global-protests-racism-police/>. Jennifer Hassan and Rick Noack, “How George Floyd's Killing Sparked a Global Reckoning,” *Washington Post* (May 25, 2021): <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/05/25/george-floyd-anniversary-global-change/>.

⁵ See: Chad Montrie, *Whiteness in Plain View: A History of Racial Exclusion in Minnesotan* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society, 2022); and Sun Yung Shin, *A Good Time for the Truth: Race in Minnesota* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society, 2021).

⁶ See, for instance: Rosalsky, “Minneapolis Ranks Near the Bottom for Racial Equality. “Racial Disparities,” State of Minnesota Employment and Economic Development.

⁷ Montrie, *Whiteness in Plain View*; Yung Shin, *A Good Time for the Truth*; Michael Fredo, *The Lynchings in Duluth* (St. Paul: Borealis Books, 2000).

color and Jewish persons from neighborhoods in Edina and Minneapolis. Here was where Philando Castille and Jamar Clark and Duante Wright and Amir Locke were killed.⁸

And when George Floyd was murdered, the awakening that occurred in regards to racism was not just that of people around the world but also people within my church. In the days following Floyd's death, I received fifteen to twenty messages from members of the community who said that they could no longer in good conscience attend a church called Colonial; they were crying out that we needed to do something to take seriously the legacy of racism in our country and racism inside of Christianity. Indeed, American Christian Nationalism argues that the only rights that must be defended are mine and those of me and people like me. Anyone who threatens these commitments is painted as a dangerous outsider and threat. Whether this be the refusal of civil rights historically to people of color or refusal of equal rights to women or to immigrants or persons of other religions or diverse sexualities, too often the church has been on the side of opposition to the guarantees of equal rights and equal protections under the law.

Thus, in this chapter I take as the starting point the realities of those whose rights have been both denied historically in the United States and are denied today. Whereas American

⁸ See: "List of Killings by Law Enforcement Officers in Minnesota," *Wikipedia*, accessed June 12, 2022: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_killings_by_law_enforcement_officers_in_Minnesota. Also, I am grateful for Max Brumberg-Kraus pointing out to me that in the mid-20th century Minneapolis was known as one of the most antisemitic cities in the country. I am also horrified by again, another recognition of histories I did not know. For instance, in 1946, journalist Carey McWilliams called Minneapolis the anti-Semitic capital of the United States. As Carleton University notes: "In his article 'Minneapolis: The Curious Twin', 'in almost every walk of life, 'an iron curtain' separates the Jews from the non-Jews in Minneapolis. Nor is this 'iron curtain' a matter of recent origin; on the contrary, it seems have always existed.'" See: "Anti-Semitism in Minnesota," *Religions in Minnesota* Carleton University, July 1, 2022, <https://religionsmn.carleton.edu/exhibits/show/st-louis-park-eruv-jewish/history/anti-semitism-in-minneapolis>. See, also: MPR News Staff, "Anti-Semitism in Minneapolis History," *MPR News* (October 18, 2017): <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2017/10/18/anti-semitism-in-minneapolis-history>.

Christian Nationalism has and continues to support the denial of rights of others (look no further than efforts to refuse LGBTQIA+ persons equal rights), my work is to animate a Christianity that holds at its center a sense for the responsibility that—from a theoretical-ethical perspective—is grounded in a deontological individual ethics.⁹

Table 1: General Framework of Ethical Reasoning

Status of ethical reflection	Personal/Individual ethics	Institutional/Social Ethics
Teleological considerations with diverse and pluralistic answers	Self-fulfilment, well-being, contingency, happiness, convictions, values	Community values, social norms, visions of the 'common good', solidarity
Deontological considerations with universalistic normative claims	Human rights based on the respect for the dignity of others, resulting in the obligation to respect the other and support his/her flourishing	Governance and legislation based on justice: just distribution of goods, fairness and equality in access to participate in all relevant social practices, compensation and corrections of past and present structural injustice

That being said, this commitment exposes a deeper and more foundational problem, namely that any move to deontological ethics as detailed in Haker's "General Framework of Ethical Reasoning"¹⁰ is refused by adherents of American Christian Nationalism. What I mean by this is

⁹ For the Christian historic defense of slavery, see: Noel Rae, "How Christian Slaveholders Used the Bible to Justify Slavery," *Time* (February 23, 2018): <https://time.com/5171819/christianity-slavery-book-excerpt/>. This is an adaptation of the longer book: Noel Rae, *The Great Stain: Witnessing American Slavery* (New York, NY: The Overlook Press, 2018). For more on the current Christian efforts to deny women and LGBTQIA persons rights, one need look no further than the current debates about abortion or transgender persons. See: Serene Jones, "There Is Nothing Godly About Outlawing Abortion — And Texas' Law Is Particularly Un-Christian," *Salon* (November 2, 2021): <https://www.salon.com/2021/11/02/there-is-nothing-godly-about-outlawing-abortion--and-texas-law-is-particularly-un-christian/>; and Omar G. Encarnación, "Florida's 'Don't Say Gay' Bill Is Part of the State's Long, Shameful History," *Time* (May 12, 2022): <https://time.com/6176224/florida-dont-say-gay-history-lgbtq-rights/>.

¹⁰ Hille Haker, "Ethical Reflexions in Nanomedicine," 71.

that the very idea that all persons are deserving of equal protections under the law, or ought to be afforded equal rights that must be defended is contested.¹¹

Even the murder of George Floyd and naming it as such is seen as a political partisan agenda.¹² Thus, I attempt to reach for a deontological ethic in the face of American Christian Nationalism since it refuses that there is any ought that must be universally afforded to persons of diverse identities.

In the pages that follow I detail my work in animating a faith and feminist political theological ethics that sees the role of the Christian in society to be one who defends and honors the dignity and rights of the neighbor and the dignity of themselves as well. In order to do so, I turn to the way in which the conception of God as *El Roi* features in my sermons as the God who respects the personhood of Hagar, even as it has been violated by Sarah and Abraham. I then detail some of the ways in which I attempt to argue for a deontological ethical grounding *even as* it is suspect within American Christian Nationalism and Protestant Ethics more broadly.¹³

Though there are many sources for defending human dignity, rights, and moral obligations that are owed to the individual, it is important to me in my work at the church to make clear that the commitment to rights, dignity, and obligations is not something that is solely

¹¹ One look no further than the treatment of migrants at our southern border to know this is the case. See, for instance: “Mexico: Abuses Against Asylum Seekers at US Border,” Human Rights Watch, accessed June 2, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/05/mexico-abuses-against-asylum-seekers-us-border>.

¹² See, for instance: Tucker Carlson, “Tucker Carlson: Everything the Media Didn’t Tell You About The Death of George Floyd,” *Fox News* (March 11, 2021): <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/tucker-carlson-george-floyd-death-what-media-didnt-tell-you>.

¹³ Social Ethics is less of prevalent part of our work as the Protestant Church, with less of a focus then on deontological individual ethics in terms of rights, duties, and corollary obligations since so much of the tradition focuses on the role of personal conversion and mystical experience, deontological “oughts” are more suspect.

external to Christian theo-ethical reflection. Instead it is the case that inherent to our faith is the radical commitment of God to honoring of the rights and dignity of all persons and all of creation. As I have named thus far, grounding rights and obligations in our faith is important so that we might truly be Christian and be able to become Christians who can resist and actively work against the dehumanizing and “ought” denying force of American Christian Nationalism.

I follow Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his call to Christian discipleship, naming that there is a content, an “ought” to what it means to be and become Christian in the face of American Christian Nationalism. Discipleship is the ought of embodied care where one takes up moral responsibility and becomes Christian through neighbor love that respects the neighbor’s dignity and rights but is also marked by the obligation to take up responsibility to learn, see, listen, correct, and unlearn so that anything that prevents the neighbor’s dignity from being honored might be resisted. Implicit to journeying the way of discipleship is the sense that one takes up responsibility for one’s self, trusting themselves and acting as moral agents in view of God who is *El Roi—the God who sees*.

El Roi (The God Who Sees)

If they say
Who cares if one more light goes out?
In a sky of a million stars
It flickers, flickers
Who cares when someone's time runs out?
If a moment is all we are
We're quicker, quicker
Who cares if one more light goes out?
Well I do.

—Linkin Park, “One More Light”¹⁴

¹⁴ Linkin Park, “One More Light,” track 9 on *One More Light*, Warner Brothers, 2017, compact disc (CD). This song holds special importance for me in view of our beloved brother Jordan Tommerdahl who died by suicide in November of 2019. I listened to this song on repeat while writing his memorial remembrance. Connecting it here to

The conception of God that undergirds the formation and articulation of my vision for an individual deontological ethic is discovered in the name that Hagar gives to God in Genesis 16, *El Roi—the God who sees me*.¹⁵ I turn to this name of God for multiple reasons. The first reason is because of the one who does the naming: Hagar. Hagar names God and calls God to account in the midst of her experience of the denial of her rights and the dignity owed to her. God, in this way, shows the people of Israel—and also us today—what ought to be afforded to a person who is not centered in one’s own story, namely, that they are due dignity and respect of their personhood.

The second reason I turn to this is because of the history of interpretation of this passage and the ways in which African American women in the United States have long turned to Hagar as a repudiation of the injustice and inhumanity and violation they have experienced at the hands of white Christians in the United States under slavery, Jim Crow, and continued racism.¹⁶

Finally, I turn to Hagar who names God *El Roi* precisely because she is coded as an “other” in

God as *El Roi* and Hagar’s journey to the wilderness (Jordan died in the woods in Wisconsin) is important for whether in life or death I believe that God sees all who suffer and this is fundamental.

¹⁵ Though this is the clear origin of this name, God as the one who sees is a theme throughout scripture. I preached about this more explicitly in a sermon entitled “Grace Actually Sees.” See: Sara Wilhelm Garbers, “Grace Actually Sees,” sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, April 19, 2020, <https://sarawg.com/2020/04/19/grace-actually-sees-a-sermon-on-zacchaeus-the-revolution-of-jesus-luke-191-10/>.

¹⁶ See: Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*, 38-44. See also: See chapter 1: “A Mistress, A Maid, and No Mercy,” in Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist View of Women's Relationships in The Bible* (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1988). See chapter 1: “Hagar’s Story: A Route to Black Women’s Issues,” in Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993). Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell, eds., *Hagar, Sarah and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006). Katharine Dobb Sakenfeld, “Sarah and Hagar: Power and Privileges (Gen 16:1-16; 21:1-21),” in *Just Wives? Stories of Power and Survival in the Old Testament and Today* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003). Chapter 1 “Hagar: The Desolation of Rejection,” in Trible, *Texts of Terror*. Debbie Blue, *Consider the Women: A Provocative Guide to Three Matriarchs of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2019). Savina Teubal, *Hagar the Egyptian: The Lost Tradition of the Matriarchs* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990). John Waters, “Who Was Hagar?” *Stony the Road We Trod*, ed. by Cain Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

the Hebrew Bible, and as such, offers an important critique to the ways the white supremacy codes people of color as other.

The first time I preached at the church about God as *El Roi* was in the fall of 2019.¹⁷ As we moved out of ReForming, we sought more deeply to live into our newly re-articulated values and build a future for ourselves by “be(ing) a good neighbor,” which was our theme for the year.¹⁸ The sermon series was designed to help form the groundwork for reclaiming part of our historical work as a community of faith as one who cares for our neighbors. Over the fall, our then senior minister (who was back from leave) preached about the call to be a good neighbor coming from many vantage points.

When it was my turn to preach, I wanted to acknowledge the failure of the ethic of neighbor love—the easy affirmation of the call to love the neighbor, but the challenging work of truly living responsibly in view of our neighbors, honoring their dignity and rights. I turned to Genesis 16, countering an oft-held belief in Christian circles which sees the patriarchs and matriarchs of the faith solely as good people who are the heroes of the story while white-washing their more painful legacies. I believed that turning toward their failures would help us to be more honest about our own failures at recognition and responsible living so that we might become good neighbors.

¹⁷ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, “On Being a Bad Neighbor,” sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, November 24, 2019, <https://sarawg.com/2019/11/24/beingbadneighbors/>.

¹⁸ This was also tied to a sense of vision and dreams that I had for the community and the building: that we would transform our campus, designed like a New England village, to truly function again as a village, for the community with centers that distinctively mark our work, such as: “A Center for Healing and Wholeness” with sliding scale therapy, yoga, retreats, spiritual direction and the like: “A Center for Faith and the Environment” including our bees, organic gardens, and faith-rooted ecological justice work: “A Center for Faith and Vocation” in which we offered a co-working space for anyone who was committed to the vision of “doing good for the neighborhood.”

I sought to make clear that there is a deep connection between the violence that is done to Hagar at the hands of Sarai and Abram through their failure to accord her dignity and to engage with her in view of the obligations that are due her, and her dignity that is acknowledged by God at the stream, such that she names *El Roi*.¹⁹ She—a woman, foreigner, and slave—she is the one who is both seen by God and names God as the one who sees her.

In this experience of being seen, her dignity is honored, and her rights are redressed.²⁰

The failure of Abraham and Sarah to honor her dignity exposes the moral failure of our obligations to honor the dignity and life of the other. As I note in the sermon:

The notion of love as being seen, and recognition as central to our ability to fulfill the greatest commandment and live out a neighbor ethic that respects human rights and dignity, is a major reason as to why I ended up doing a doctorate in ethics. I've told the story before about how when I was in junior high, I learned about World War II and Nazi Germany, and I could not understand how humans could do such violence to one another. I was the kid who came to faith on account of John 3:16, and thought: "God made everybody, God loves everybody. How could there be a Holocaust?" It blew (and still blows) my mind. Could anything fly more directly in the face of love of neighbor than the egregious horror of genocide? I didn't understand how someone could see the person before them and not see them as human.²¹

¹⁹ In speaking of specific obligations, I am referring her to the work of Martha Nussbaum in regard to the obligations we have to honor the central human capabilities: (1) Life (2) Bodily Health (3) Bodily Integrity (4) Senses, imagination, and thought (5) Emotions (6) Practical Reason (7) Affiliation (8) Other species (9) Play (10) Control over one's environment See: Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2013): 35.

²⁰ I will say more about the connection between being seen as understood through theories of recognition and the connection between this and responsibility toward the other throughout this chapter.

²¹ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, "On Being a Bad Neighbor." Note also: Recognition Theory is a significant field of study inside of ethics. Of it Haker notes: "Recognition theories interpret the human desire to be seen and acknowledged by others, a condition that defines the dialectic of personal and social identity." See: Hille Haker, "Recognition and Responsibility," *Religions* 12 (2021): 2, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/12/7/467>. For more on theories of recognition, see: Axel Honneth, "Recognition: Invisibility: On the epistemology of 'recognition'," *Aristotelian Society Supplementary* 75, no. 1 (2001): 111–126. Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1995). Simon Thompson, *The Political Theory of Recognition: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006). Paul Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2005); Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition: An Essay*, ed. by Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne Press, 1998). Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2001).

I continued, naming my own failure of to uphold the rights of others and to honor their equal dignity. For most of my life I had identified with Sarai, my namesake...and I missed, or did not pay attention to Hagar, that is, until one of my black friends named to me how central Hagar is for so many black women.²² I took her challenge as an invitation (and a deep reflection on how our location and identity effects how we read the Bible, and why it is important to read diverse voices) and began to read commentaries on Hagar, particularly the work of womanist author Wil Gafney and her book *Womanist Midrash*, amongst others.²³

The truth is, the reason I did not know about Hagar or really had not read this text much—let alone heard a sermon about it—has something to do with being white and living in a world where we tend to tell hero stories, and identify with the hero or central actor of the story. Thus, throughout the sermon I note and highlight both the failures of Abraham and Sarah to act in view of the rights and dignity of Hagar and how complex all of this is. For instance, Sarai has Hagar elevated from being a slave, a concubine, to the status of second wife so that her child could actually be an heir to the promise, and yet she also abuses Hagar and refuses Hagar’s agency by giving her to Abram for sex and procreation. And when Hagar conceives, there is a deep rift between the women so Hagar flees, because she is willing to risk her life so that she

²² I will forever be grateful to Jaddie Edwards for naming how my vision as a white woman, named Sara, was focused solely on seeing Sarah and not Hagar. As I noted in the sermon: “Indeed, the first person who pressed me to examine Hagar was a black woman from my former church who, when I was going to preach on Genesis and talk about Abram and Sarai’s journey, asked me if I was going to talk about Hagar. My face surely reflected my lack of knowledge for why I should do so, and she said... ‘You know Hagar is one of the most important stories in the Bible for Black women, right? You’ve been taught to just focus on Sarai because you’re a white woman, but we black women know the story from the perspective of the slave woman.’”

²³ Again: Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*; Tribble and Russell, eds., *Hagar, Sarah and Their Children*. Dobb Sakenfeld, “Sarah and Hagar: Power and Privileges; Tribble, *Texts of Terror*.

might die in freedom, as a self, not as sub-human. I preach about the relationship between Hagar and Sarah:

A lot of commentators interpret this interplay as being about the natural rivalry between women in a society where the majority of your worth and identity was predicated on if you could conceive or not. Another way to read this though is through the perspective of an enslaved woman's contempt toward another woman who has mistreated her and used her a sex slave for her husband. We so often roll right over moments like this in the Bible, and it behooves us to read more slowly so that we don't skip over the suffering and injustice in stories during our time either. So, pause here: imagine how you'd feel toward another woman if she had enslaved you and then made you a sex slave, a forced baby maker? Has anyone seen *Handmaid's Tale*, or read the story? The story of Hagar, Sarai, and Abram makes me think a lot about the dynamics in *Handmaid's Tale*.²⁴ It may be that Hagar looks at Sarai with contempt because she's like, "Look what you did to me. You're not treating me as a person. You're not seeing me." And it is so bad that Hagar ends up running away, risking her life so that even if she dies, she dies in freedom.²⁵

But then God finds Hagar by a spring of water, which in Hebrew is the same word for "eye," she is found by the "fountain by an eye," in the wilderness. This notion of the "God who sees" is already starting to come into view through the text. Sarai does not see Hagar. Abram does not see Hagar. They have mistreated and abused her and refused to acknowledge the image of God in Hagar. But Hagar, she goes to the wilderness and is seen.

As I noted in the last chapter, the wilderness figures prominently throughout the texts of the Christian and Jewish traditions. The wilderness is a place where God shows up, where you hear from God and are changed. Indeed in this place, God shows up to Hagar. There is something about the wilderness, the wild, that is akin to the vision of the individual teleological ethic—that we have to go into the wilderness, we have to go to the cross in order to find life for

²⁴ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (New York: Anchor Books, 1998). The book provides the initial storyline and characters for the recent Hulu series: *The Handmaid's Tale*, created by Bruce Miller, aired 2017-present, on Hulu, <https://www.hulu.com/series/the-handmaids-tale-565d8976-9d26-4e63-866c-40f8a137ce5f>.

²⁵ Wilhelm Garbers, "On Being a Bad Neighbor."

ourselves. And there is something important here, for a person who is already so subjugated and harmed, the angel does not tell her to not be afraid, because she has already been afraid—no, it is not Hagar who must be told not to fear, for she knows the terror that comes with the violations of one's rights where one cannot breathe.

In verse 13 God speaks with Hagar. She calls God “El Roi,” “the God who sees.” And she names the place as “the well of the living one who sees me.” Hagar is seen by God and then goes back to Sarah and Abraham, armed with a promise that guarantees her a future. Hagar is restored to her rightful dignity and place as a child of God. She goes back, she bears Ishmael, and the story continues from there. Her life has been changed because an unseen, violated woman is seen by the one who sees all things and, in that seeing, makes certain that her dignity is respected.²⁶

Hagar's name means “a foreign thing.” It is the root word that is translated as “sojourner” or “foreigner.”²⁷ This was the call to Israel: they were responsible to care for the sojourner in their midst. This call of the promise, the forgetting that ensues, and the call to remembrance is the narrative dance of the story of Israel in the Bible, but it is true of us as well—the deontological ethical vision is before us, the call to the “ought.” We ought to honor the dignity

²⁶ Even though this is a partial realization and honoring of her dignity—at first, she goes back for a time so that she does not die in the wilderness. Eventually she and her son make their own way into freedom.

²⁷ See chapter 5 of “Hagar: The ‘Foreign Thing’ and the God who Sees Her,” in Karen González, *The God Who Sees: Immigrants, the Bible, and the Journey to Belong* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2019). Again, for more on Hagar, see also: Gafney, *Womanist Midrash*, 38-44. Chapter 1: “A Mistress, A Maid, and No Mercy,” in Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist View of Women's Relationships in The Bible* (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1988). Chapter 1: “Hagar's Story: A Route to Black Women's Issues,” in Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993.). Tribble and Russell, *Hagar, Sarah and Their Children*. Dobb Sakenfeld, “Sarah and Hagar” in *Just Wives?* Chapter 1 “Hagar: The Desolation of Rejection,” in Tribble, *Texts of Terror*. Blue, *Consider the Women*. Teubal, *Hagar the Egyptian*. Waters, “Who Was Hagar?”

and rights of the other and ourselves and we are morally obligated to act in view of these rights and duties:

These are real stories. They're human stories. They're invitations to us. They remind us that when we remember the promise, that is when we're able to live in alignment with all that we are called to be; we are blessed by the God who sees us so that we might be a blessing. We have the promise of God's love, of the God who has always seen us. And God keeps reminding us, "Don't forget."²⁸

Our call then is to be a people who remember and so much of the role of work and task of preaching is to help people remember that there is an “ought” to being Christian. I preach to call people to remembrance of their need to turn toward their own stories of captivity, subjugation, exile, and liminality in order to respond to the other in their land, who is the foreigner, the widow, the orphan in their midst and remember.

El Roi, the God of all love sees each of us, but more importantly here, *El Roi* serves as a critique of American Christian Nationalism and the fear of the stranger and denial of the rights of the other that is too often allowable inside of American Christian Nationalism.

The Ought of Discipleship

Away away
You have been banished
Your land is gone
And given me

And here I will spread my wings
Yes I will call this home

What's this you say?
You feel a right to remain?
Then stay and I will bury you

What's that you say

²⁸ Wilhelm Garbers, “On Being a Bad Neighbor.”

Your father's spirit still lives in this place
I will silence you

—Dave Matthews Band, “Don’t Drink the Water”²⁹

In a time where truth is a morally contested category,³⁰ a deontological ethics argues that there are norms about rights, obligations, and duties that diverse people ought to agree upon. *And yet*, one of the most challenging and disorienting aspects of our current political and religious climate in the United States is that the very people who I grew up hearing were the defenders of “absolute truth,” over-against the “post-modern liberals,” have become the very religious leaders who not only have supported and cling to Donald Trump as a Messianic figure, but increasingly their supposed “biblical values” hold very little actual biblical content. And so much of my work in the community is about defending, arguing for, making clear that there are certain ethical norms that require adherence if one names oneself Christian.

Nowhere is this ethical vision more clear than in my June 17, 2018 sermon entitled “Breathe Out.”³¹ My aim in the sermon was to help the congregation consider what it might

²⁹ Dave Matthews Band, “Don’t Drink the Water,” track 4 on *Before These Crowded Streets*, RCA, 1998, compact disc (CD).

³⁰ See, for instance: “Maria Konnikova, “Trump’s Lies vs. Your Brain,” *Politico Magazine* (Jan./Feb. 2017): <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/01/donald-trump-lies-liar-effect-brain-214658/>; Vittorio Bufacchi, “Truth, Lies and Tweets: A Consensus Theory of Post-Truth,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 47, no. 3 (2021): 347–361; Jeremy Adam Smith, “Can the Science of Lying Explain Trump’s Support?” *Greater Good Magazine* (March 29, 2017): https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/can_the_science_of_lying_explain_trumps_support; Aaron Hanlon, “Postmodernism Didn’t Cause Trump, But It Explains Him,” *The Washington Post* (August 31, 2018): https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/postmodernism-didnt-cause-trump-it-explains-him/2018/08/30/0939f7c4-9b12-11e8-843b-36e177f3081c_story.html; Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018); Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004); Hannah Arendt, “Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers,” *The New York Review* (November 18, 1971): <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1971/11/18/lying-in-politics-reflections-on-the-pentagon-pape/>.

³¹ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, “Breathe Out,” sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN June 17, 2018, <https://sarawg.com/2018/06/17/breathe-out-a-sermon-on-ii-corinthians-516-21/>.

mean truly to be Christian in the world. I offered a counterpoint to the reductionist partisan politics and, instead, to challenged people to be and become Christian and wrestle deeply with what it means to follow Christ in their time.

Figuring out how to love God and love neighbor isn't easy. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer challenged us, salvation is free, but discipleship is costly. So to actually be Christian, to wrestle with really tough issues like immigration policy will mean that we might disagree, and in fact, we will disagree on matters like just immigration policies ought to be in our country (the ability to disagree and be in community is part of the legacy of this place, which is amazing). But what if we were a church continued to challenge and shape and push and invite one another so that amongst our disagreements, we push each other to have political positions that strive to be first above all, to be Christian? What this means is that Christians of good conscience can and will disagree about exactly how their country ought to deal with migration and borders, BUT our political positions cannot violate Christian ethics. So, it is not tenable for a Christian to say about migrants from south of our border: "Let them die in the desert! because if everyone is made in the image of God, then our policy positions must first be rooted in the creator God who has created all of humanity in God's image. Do you see what I mean? Are we willing to let the ethical vision of the gospel shape our way of living responsibly in the world? ...

May we be a people who continue to invite and challenge ourselves related to our policies, to ask ourselves how we are or are not integrating the Biblical vision, the Biblical story into how we live and respond the gospel with our lives in building the kingdom of God. Do your political positions reflect the gospel? How are they shaped by your faith? What is the Christian source for your opinions about the economy, housing, food, climate change, migration, reproductive rights, and the like. Of course, none of our politics or policy positions will be able to fully reflect or represent the full vision of the Christian faith, for we live in a complicated and broken world, but our faith ought to stand in deep challenge and invitation to us in forming our way of being human and living our faith in this world in this time. To be Christian is to be political, it's not to be partisan....to breathe out faith is to live our lives in response to the call and challenge to be people of the gospel.³²

I so vividly remember preaching this sermon. I was concerned that I would get pushback on it (and I did) because I was "being political." In fact, this has been the greatest critique of my pastoral work in the community: that I am being too political when naming that there are certain

³² Ibid.

moral obligations and duties that we have and that we may even morally judge certain things as being unethical and/or unchristian. Yet I continue to challenge the church that there is an ought to discipleship that demands we honor the dignity of creation and one another.

The last thing I want to say about the call to breathe out love on this Father's Day is by way of a personal narration of how this plays out in my life...As a Christ-follower, one of my political commitments is that I identify as a feminist...sort of strange to say on Father's Day, right? But here's WHY I am a Christian who is also a feminist: because I believe everyone is made in the image of God and the reality of history and the truth of our present time is that the world hasn't always allowed for women to be free, to be who they are as image-bearers of God. And as a Christ-follower, I believe that God wants us all to be free to live the fullness of the image of God that God has placed in each of us. I want women to be free and I want men to be free, to be the fullness of the image of God in their lives too.³³

I name the realities of racism and share stories of those who are suffering the violation of their dignity as ways to continue to press us that as the church we must talk about the places where dignity and rights are being denied and that this is proper to the sphere and work of Christian discipleship.

I've been thinking a lot about this passage and have been wondering: If Paul were writing to us today, what might he say to us? What might his questions bring in terms of challenges and invitations to us?

I was sitting with this wondering yesterday as Andy and I drove down to Wisconsin for a funeral for his great uncle. On the way there we listened to an audio book called *Heavy: An American Memoir*. The author, Kiese Laymon, is an African American man who relays his experience of growing up as a black boy in the United States, talking about the pain and injustice he's suffered and endured.³⁴

This book, in turn, got me thinking about another text by Ta-Nehisi Coates *Between the World and Me*.³⁵ And this got me thinking about I Corinthians and this church that is wrestling with its diversity. Some are eating meat, some are not. And they are trying to figure out how to become a church of diverse people. In our time, if Paul

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Kiese Laymon, *Heavy: An American Memoir* (New York, NY: Scribner, 2018).

³⁵ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015).

were writing to us, I wonder if he would challenge and invite us to ask what the good news says to us about issues of race and injustice in our world?

Then a quote from Fredrick Douglass showed up on my Instagram this morning, posted by Christena Cleveland who is the author of the book that we are reading together during Black History Month: *Disunity in Christ*. The quote reads: “Between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked...I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land.”

Ugh, right? I almost cried.

This quote stands as a challenge in the vein of what Paul is doing here in inviting the church to be rooted in the good news in which they stand.

In the past months we’ve often talked about how the church in the US is in decline. I want to bring I Corinthians into that conversation and say: “Let’s listen to Paul! Let’s be the church then!”

Because when things like this (an image of the *Houston Chronicle* about abuse in the Southern Baptist Church) get published by the *Houston Chronicle*, where they are exposing how over 20 years more than 700 victims were sexually molested or abused by more than 200 leaders in the Southern Baptist Church, with very little recourse, *these are reasons why people leave church!*³⁶ These are reasons where the gospel that we’ve proclaimed that “God is love!” this supposed good news in which we stand, suddenly isn’t good news...even for us. So Paul encounters us in this space of profound failure of our lives to preach good news and exclaims to “Remember the GOOD NEWS! Let’s be people of Good News!”

Not only here, but I continue to return to this theme so as to ask the community that we take seriously the rights of others and the obligations we have.

I titled this sermon “Strangers in the Land” because I wanted to talk about our actual context—our current political moment.

UGH (deep breath). These conversations are really hard right now, right? I’m sure for some of you in seeing my sermon title you were a bit worried about what might happen this morning, so thank you all for showing up.

Here’s my concern: that sometimes in our current political moment we hear the word “stranger” from Deuteronomy and it’s SO laden with baggage. You might have heard the sermon title and thought: “Oh! It’s a liberal agenda that’s going to get preached on Sunday!” Or maybe you read the sermon title and you were like: “Sara better bring it on Sunday!”...

³⁶ See: Robert Downen, et al., “Abuse of Faith,” *Houston Chronicle* (February 9, 2019): <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/investigations/article/Southern-Baptist-sexual-abuse-spreads-as-leaders-13588038.php>.

And what concerns me is that sometimes these other things become the first thing accidentally or instead of our central calling to have God be at the center. And my hope and my prayer is that as we wrestle with what it means to be a good neighbor that we come back to the text—that we wrestle with it together, that we ask questions...

What does it mean that we are called throughout Scripture to care for the widow, the orphan, the stranger?

Sometimes we can too easily conflate these calls into particular partisan positions...but please, let's be intentional about letting the Gospel and the good news of this life that Christ calls us to, to offer us invitation, reminder, and critique.

We aren't going to agree about what to do about borders. We aren't going to agree about a whole lot of things. When in the life of this church have we ever agreed about everything? We disagree. GREAT! Welcome to community! Welcome to being in relationship.

It is through this wrestling that we can become better, right? Iron sharpens iron. So let's be better Christians together.

Let's be people who wrestle with these texts, acknowledging that there are some positions that can't be defended. As a Christ-follower; I don't get to say: "Kill everybody." Not an option, folks. I would pretty much have to throw out all of the Bible if I say that.³⁷

After George Floyd was murdered and we were working to change our name, the idea that there is a content to the ought of being Christian and that our work as the church is to fight for and defend the dignity of others became especially contentious. Just naming our grief about his death, or the ministers all joining with other faith leaders for prayer following his murder and the subsequent fires and protests in our city, even that was viewed as us being "too political." There were members in the congregation that were sure that there had been a liberal take-over of the church, even as other members demanded we would have the conversation about racism in our country on account to of the violence inflicted on people of color in our country.

As I look back over my sermons during this time, they went more decidedly in the direction of a call to formation and becoming Christian because any direct confrontation with

³⁷ Wilhelm Garbers, "Strangers in the Land."

demands of rights and duties felt nearly impossible. Over the year since George Floyd was murdered, I did most of my work on deontological ethics through classes, podcasts, and conversations. We developed a specific space for this called “Faith & Justice.” We watched movies, read books, and facilitated conversations on books such as: *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*; *The Fire Next Time*; *I’m Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*; *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*; *White Too Long*; *The Color of Law*; *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*; *Just Mercy*. We also watched movies together such as: *13th*, *Selma*, and *Just Mercy*.³⁸ This allowed for a space to wrestle with the history of racism in the United States and ask what it demanded of us as the church. We lost many members of the church on account of these “Faith & Justice” events and conversations along with our efforts to change our name. This was a very painful time and disorienting. It felt impossible at times to know how to lead in a space where human rights and human dignity are themselves under attack and are disputed. Yet, I still maintain that there is an “ought” to Christianity and keep on preaching and calling the community to honor the dignity and rights of others.

I’ve returned to this work of defending the “ought” of Christian formation and have begun to name more explicitly that we are demanded, as Christians, to be a people committed to the rights and dignity of others. I recently preached on the story from Acts where Paul is headed

³⁸ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*. Channing Brown, *I’m Still Here*. Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*. Jones, *White too Long*; Rothstein, *The Color of Law*. Reynolds and Kendi, *Stamped*. Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014). *13th*, directed by Ava DuVernay (Netflix, 2016), <https://www.netflix.com/title/80091741>. *Selma*, directed by Ava DuVernay (Paramount Pictures, 2014), https://www.amazon.com/gp/video/detail/amzn1.dv.gti.3ca9f727-022e-c21d-8787-8584c463b841?autoplay=0&ref_=atv_cf_strg_wb. *Just Mercy*, directed by Destin Daniel Cretton (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2019), <https://tv.apple.com/us/movie/just-mercy/umc.cmc.18g6eu15orgsvcbm39ur1dd5d>.

to Damascus to round up Christians and he is encountered by God and his eyes are opened and he is changed.

And he sees, he sees anew, he sees the world aright. And I wonder likewise, what it might mean for us to be people who keep leaning in to seeing the world and waking up anew. We have lived in the midst of a Christian story in which up until this day, not all bodies and not all people are seen as equally human or valued as being equally human or treated as such.

And I really don't get why it's such a radical idea to think that maybe we should be the people who are about treating everyone like they're made in the image of God. Should we not be a people who are about seeing one another, honoring each other, and not killing one another? It seems like somewhere, some time ago in our evolutionary history, we were taught to think that there are scarce resources and we aren't all equal. But as Christians, at the center of our faith is a story of a God who formed every single person in God's image. Do you know that of the Ancient Near Eastern creation stories, one of which is the Jewish story in Genesis, that it is only the Genesis story in women are actually created, and created as not some like afterthought or toxic thing, but are actually named as being formed also in the creation and as part of being made in God's image? Jesus comes to earth and sees everyone, calls people down from trees, sees folks who've been ostracized from community. And then in the early church, we see these examples and witnesses where men and women, people, all of them in their bodies and in their skin—as we talked about in Acts 2—they hear the good news and they are then speaking it in their own languages. Should we not then likewise, as the church in our time, be a people who live and embody that kind of good news? Now, maybe all of you are like, “Yes, Sara, I've already thought this like forever.” Well, great. Then let this be an encouraging word to you this morning to keep leaning in.

What would it mean? What does it look like for us to not just have a day set apart where bodies—that is to say, particular women's bodies—that women who have birthed or are mothers are honored. What does it mean for all of our bodies, every single day to be seen, to be safe, to be cared for, to be loved?

This week my Instagram stories were filled with a lot of women grieving and raging in view of the probably forthcoming Supreme Court decision. Now, I recognize that in our church we have different thoughts about how we orient to the modern day political conversation about being pro-life or pro-choice.

I'm not here to tell you which of those political positions to hold, because I think they both have problems anyway, but I am here to reinvoke us in that time when I saw my Instagram blowing up with grief and fear to ask: what does it mean to be the church in that space? Are we to be the people who set apart one day to honor Mothers, but then the other days, hold up stones that we throw at them or deny them human rights and dignity because we have letters from the high priest telling them: “I know you're wrong and you deserve to come to harm because of it.”

Or will we be a people who like Jesus, say, “Lay down the stones” and instead seek to foster a world in which all of us have life and are seen.

I grew up in of a religious community that was very political. To be Christian was to be Republican. When I was 14 years old, little Sara (me) wrote a speech for my speech class. And I said, if you want to stop abortions, then don't call kids from single parent families bastards at church (which was what I was called). Don't talk about women who are on welfare as being “welfare queens.” Don't tell an eight year old she's going to be pregnant by the time she's 14, because her mom was a single parent.

What does it mean for us? What I'm saying is that wherever you end up in your political positions, might they be ones that are rooted and grounded in the faith of the God who has formed and created all of us in God's image and to then be a people who refuse to take letters to other towns so we can harm one another. Instead, let's be a people who say, “Let the scales fall off! Let us love one another! Let us create a world in which each of our bodies—whatever our genders, whatever is going on—that we can be honored.³⁹

The Obligation of Responsibility

Hey brother
Do you still believe in one another?
Hey sister
Do you still believe in love? I wonder
Oh, if the sky comes falling down
For you
There's nothing in this world I wouldn't do
What if I'm far from home?
(Oh brother, I will hear you call)
What if I lose it all?
(Oh sister, I will help you out)
Oh, if the sky comes falling down
For you
There's nothing in this world I wouldn't do

—Avicci, “Hey Brother”⁴⁰

To be a Christian in the face of American Christian Nationalism and its history of denial of rights and dignity and life to people who are not like us is that we are to be a people who defend and take seriously the right to life of all persons and who seek to honor creation. This

³⁹ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, “Waking Up,” sermon given at Meetinghouse Church, Edina, MN. May 8, 2022, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/waking-up-sara-wilhelm-garbers/id1512364728?i=1000564737896>.

⁴⁰ Avicci, “Hey Brother,” track 3 on *Heavy*, PRMD-Island, 2013, compact disc (CD).

then is the call and the work of the Christian: to, in view of the rights and dignity due to persons, that we are to be a people who labor under the obligation we have to care for and be responsible to ensure that the rights of the neighbor and the stranger are honored. Thus, I make this turn in many of my sermons following the work of H. Richard Niebuhr, Emilie Townes, and Hille Haker.⁴¹

Niebuhr's *The Responsible Self* roots ethics in the one who has been acted upon which, in turn asks us to live as responsive beings in the world who live responsibly in view of the other. Contrasting his work with deontological ethics (the right) and teleological ethics (the good), he notes that his interest is in cathekontic ethics (the fitting).⁴² As such, he explores the elements of responsibility: response, interpretation, accountability, and social solidarity, asking: "To whom or what am I responsible and in what community of interaction am I myself?"⁴³ This responsibility is embodied by the self who is always caught in the web of relationality as part of a universal community, situated in time and history.⁴⁴ To live responsibly is to live our lives in fitting response—to God and all of creation. As he notes: "When I respond to the One creative

⁴¹ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*. Townes, *Womanist Ethics*. My doctoral advisor and dissertation director, Hille Haker, has had a significant impact on my thinking and bringing together the concepts of recognition, memory, and responsibility. Her current book project explores these themes in-depth (in process): *Recognition and Responsibility: Critical Theory and Christian Ethics*. For more of her work in this area see, for instance: "Recognition and Responsibility;" "*The Responsible Self – Questions after Darwin*;" and *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*.

⁴² Niebuhr, *Responsible Self*, 60-61. Though he distinguishes his work from deontological ethics, I identify his ethics as a deontological vision in that it is rooted in assumptions about rights and obligations. He writes: "If we use value terms then the differences among the three approaches may be indicated by the terms, the good, the right, and the fitting; for teleology is concerned always with the highest good...deontology is concerned with the right...but for the ethics of responsibility the fitting action, the one that fits into a total into a total interaction as a response and as anticipation of further response is alone conducive to the good and alone is right." (61)

⁴³ Ibid, 60-65. Quote from 68.

⁴⁴ Ibid., see 88-94 esp.

power, I place my companions, human and subhuman and superhuman, in the one universal society which has its center neither in me nor in any finite cause but in the Transcendent One.”⁴⁵

From Niebuhr then I take that the ethical life is the responsible life—a life lived not in abstraction but embodied in time and place with others. To live responsibly is to ask what is fitting and demands one cultivate the capacity to not only be responsive in theory but to interpret the times so as to live responsibly in view of actual persons.

From Emilie M. Townes, I have learned about the intersection of memory and the importance of interrogating memory / developing countermemory⁴⁶ so that the “fantastic hegemonic imagination”⁴⁷ which erases people of color can be deconstructed. Townes takes Niebuhr’s asking of “what is going on” and presses it further in the direction of necessary solidarity and critical reflection so that one might live responsibly in ways that allow for the possibility of actual justice and the realization of honoring human dignity and universal human rights.⁴⁸

Many of my sermons explore this theme of memory, seeking to connect it to the story of Israel and the call of the prophets to the people that they would remember so that they might live responsibly. As I noted in my 2020 Ash Wednesday sermon entitle “Hope Interrupts,” based on Leviticus 23. In the sermon, I call us to be a people who remember, noting that this remembrance

⁴⁵ Ibid., 124.

⁴⁶ See esp. Townes, 47 and 52.

⁴⁷ This phrase occurs throughout the book (see: chapter 2, esp. 18-21) for some good context on what she means by this) and is a central way of naming the oppressive forces that produce erasure and violence against people of color. The necessary ethical development and formation of the self who can resist these forces is located, for Townes, in the development of the “womanist dancing mind.”

⁴⁸ Townes intentionally follows Niebuhr’s work while going in her own direction.

is a central task to the ethical life and the living responsibly as Christians in our time. As I note about the role of Passover (which corresponds to the centrality and role to the start of Lent in the Christian tradition):

(T)he Passover is the reminder to the people of Israel, people who had been enslaved for 400 years, that God had heard their cries and intervened and saved them. The night of Passover, as Exodus records, the enslaved people put blood of the lamb on their thresholds and doorposts so that indeed they might be saved and their children, their young boys would not die. And so, to this day, Jewish people begin the year in this remembrance, both a remembrance that they had been enslaved...and remembrance that God saved them. This is where they start their year and move with God into the year in that remembrance. Memory is a central theme for living rightly in the ways of YHWH. When we look at the story of God's people of Israel, we see that things go awry every time they forget, right? They go into the land and sometimes they become the oppressors because they forget that they were once enslaved, so every year God in God's grace says, "We're going to have another time for you to pause, so you remember. Remember, it is for freedom that I have called you. Remember."⁴⁹

Over the Passover Seder dinner meal, four questions are typically asked of the youngest children. The stage is set with the central question "Why is this night different from other nights?" And on this Ash Wednesday I asked them the same question: "Why is this night different? What do we remember on this night?"

And for us tonight, my friends, we will make the signs of the cross on our foreheads with ashes. Do you know why? Why only tonight do we mark ourselves with ash? What is the grace we celebrate? Do we remember why we gather? Do we remember why Lent? Do we remember why we turn our faces to Jerusalem? Do we remember who this Jesus is? Do we remember that the cross is for us? What makes tonight different. Let us pause so that we might remember.

Because sometimes we forget...

And so my friends, on this night as we remember the ashes, we are reminded that we're in need of at least a once-a-year reset. A night to remember that we are dependent

⁴⁹ For more on Passover see: Paul Steinberg, "Passover," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Judaism and Jewish Culture*, ed. by Judith R. Baskin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 470-1, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.flagship.luc.edu/lib/luc/detail.action?docID=1744019>. David Mamet and Michael McCurdy. *Passover* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996). For more on the connection between Passover and the eucharist, see: Matthew Colvin, *The Lost Supper: Revisiting Passover and the Origins of the Eucharist* (Landham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2019). Sermon: Wilhelm Garbers, "Hope Interrupts."

upon the love and grace of God. That as human people, we are frail, we're imperfect, we harm one another and we have been harmed and we are in need of grace.⁵⁰

I then take the commitment to remembering rightly and the power of memory and wed it with Haker's work on recognition and responsibility. In many ways, this is the necessary and real confrontation that the community has engaged in since the summer of 2020 in taking up the call and invitation to change our name: it has been a challenge to interrogate a white-washed history of American Origins and remember rightly so that we might actually be the church and live responsibly.⁵¹

Haker brings together recognition and responsibility in her work, arguing that "the concept of recognition must be complemented by the concept of responsibility," and that they are normative ethics that are foundational to Christian ethics, especially in view of the failure of recognition and responsibility throughout Christian history.⁵² As noted above, recognition theories tend to the ways in which one wishes (and needs) to be seen by others. Haker details how recognition operates as a normative concept in four spheres: epistemological, social-psychological, ethical, and political.⁵³ On the one hand there is the cognition of recognition (epistemological), and the ways in which one must be recognized in the social sphere (and how

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ As Christian Collins Winn wrote in our position paper: "The present cultural moment offers a significant opportunity to learn and consider how we want to show up in a world that for many people is turned upside down. Recognition of this significant moment has also led to a felt need to revisit a conversation which has been going on in our congregation among laity and leadership for some time, regarding the name 'Colonial.'" See: Christian Collins Winn, "Building Bridges for Our Future," Colonial Church Name Change, accessed online: <https://www.colonialchurch.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Building-Bridges-for-Our-Future.pdf>, accessed on May 28, 2021. For the full document, see Appendix E.

⁵² Haker, "Recognition and Responsibility," 2.

⁵³ Ibid., 2-3.

misrecognition cause moral harm—the social-psychological); recognition is also about the moral agent and (Haker, following Hegel and Ricoeur) the necessity of mutual recognition (the ethical). That recognition understood negatively as misrecognition is not merely the sphere of individual ethical judgment but lays bare that misrecognition is shaped and upheld by social and political institutions and arrangements whereby justice and equal rights are obstructed (the political).⁵⁴

If deontological ethics then is about the rights and duties and obligations due one another, the “ought” of human relationality, theories of recognition expose the failure and necessity of mutual recognition in order for realization of “the ought” to be a possibility.⁵⁵ As Haker notes of theories of recognition:

(It) is an attempt to connect the normative/deontological and the evaluative/teleological dimension of morality, correlating legal rights with the personal bonds between individuals, and ideally with informal and formal practices of social cooperation among different groups of civil society. The critique of misrecognition provides a critique of moral harm, inflicted upon individuals and/or groups, in actions, practices, or structures.⁵⁶

Haker weds recognition with responsibility, naming that both are necessary for it matters not just that we are seen, but also that we are responded to.⁵⁷ Here Haker makes the connection to Christian faith. There is something important to the gift of being seen by God that radicalizes the golden rule and the greatest commandment from any sort of reciprocity to that of grace.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Summary and detailing this through the four spheres is taken from Haker. *Ibid.*, 2-4.

⁵⁵ Again, see Haker’s summary on Recognition Ethics. *Ibid.*, 4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁸ Here Haker builds upon Ricoeur’s work. See Haker., “Recognition and Responsibility,” 7 and 9. She writes: “A response can be considered ethical if it is given as if it were a first gift: not a pay-back, and with no demand of a return, it is a second-first gift, as Ricoeur calls it (Ricoeur 2005, Part 3, p. 243). Mutual recognition happens when

We are to act in such a way as to ensure that we do not violate the “ought” we owe to one another, that we do not make possible misrecognition but seek to live out responsible responses.⁵⁹ This is the fundamental assumption in my sermon “I AM the Light of the World:” that the I AM calls to us and invites us to live in a certain way as it acts on us and calls us to responsibility grounded in a response, and that we are beings who are able to give and live in response to the other before us.

Here then I am working to make visible this call to live responsibly. Even though the call of the gospel is clear in many regards about the content of what it means to be responsible, I acknowledged in this sermon the frequent failures of recognition, remembrance, and responsibility. Given on the 4th of July Weekend, I name how the call of freedom is not just for us, but it is to be something that we live and something we share as a people who are called to be the light of the world (Matthew 5:14). And so I call to the community to come into the light and then to shine the light and share this light with others, living as responsible selves, who care for our neighbors and live love. As I preached:

Last week, Andy and I watched *The Heart of Gold*, a HBO documentary on the coverup inside of the United States Gymnastic Association related to Larry Nassar's abuse of over 300 young girls under his care. As I watched it, I didn't just think about Larry Nassar. I thought about myself...how in my thirst and quest for the USA to win the gold at the Olympics to, back in late eighties and early nineties, to win against the USSR and the Romanians...I never stopped to think about the cost.⁶⁰

I never stopped to ask questions about who might get harmed in the pursuit of gold. And watching that documentary reminded me that sometimes having to walk in the

self and other both demonstrate this attitude and engage in a generosity toward each other that is, paradoxically, not reciprocal but mutual.” Ibid., 9.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁰ *At the Heart of Gold*, directed by Erin Lee Carr (HBO, 2019), <https://www.hbo.com/movies/at-the-heart-of-gold>.

light and telling true stories about who we are, about our families, about our gymnastics teams can be painful.⁶¹

One final note I wish to make about responsibility that is rooted in and connected with recognition and remembrance is that—importantly in a white congregation—that responsibility is always *responsibility to* not *responsibility for*. This is an important distinction because *responsibility to* is rooted in the notion that all of us are equally agents who hold certain demands to one another for mutual recognition. When responsibility gets misconstrued as *responsibility for*, it disrupts and dishonors the agency of others and results in paternalism, “white saviorism,” and/or over functioning/co-dependency. As I noted of my own struggle with responsibility:

I’m in the midst of a significant life decision, and in my discernment and processing I’ve been brought face-to-face with the ways in which I was formed to believe that it is my job to carry people and systems—that I must do this so that the things and the world I believe in will come to fruition.

And while there are parts of this internalization that I intend to carry with me long into the future (for I believe we are all, indeed, a part of the earth and one another), there are other parts of this narrative and identity that I seek to breathe life into so that I might release and let go of with compassion and self-love the ways in which I believe that I am responsible for saving (or destroying) the things and people I love.

What I mean by this wrestling is something like this quote: “You don’t have to set yourself on fire to keep someone else warm.”

For maybe, like me, things in this world have and continue to break your heart.

And you carry people and this earth in your skin and in your soul.

And I find that at times in this work I am lured into believing that I can be a sacrifice for the cause of more love and justice in the world.

But then...I am gently held and reminded by a quiet voice that it is through love that the world is changed, not through fire, and certainly not through the sacrifice of myself will the long arc of goodness find life and breath.

No, instead the way to keep one another warm is through the radiance of our own heat and beauty and skin as we hold one another. For both you and I are needed to survive the long night. Through our words, our presence, and our collective warmth, we

⁶¹ Wilhelm Garbers, "I AM the Light of the World."

will keep one another awake; we will keep watch while the other finds needed sleep...and together we will awaken to a new morning.⁶²

To be Christian in the face of American Christian Nationalism asks that we live a responsibility rooted in remembrance and recognition, honoring the agency and dignity both of ourselves and all other living beings.

Individual Deontological Ethics: Becoming Responsible Christians

As I have outlined in this chapter, my vision for an individual deontological ethics is rooted in *El Roi*, the God who sees and acknowledges the dignity and rights of the foreign one. This God then asks us to live as disciples, taking up the formational curriculum to be and become Christians in our time as those who likewise are animated by the “ought” of the demand that we honor and respect the dignity and rights of others, ourselves, and creation. To turn to this work and cultivate the types of selves who live in view of these obligations, I am aiming to help to foster a community of persons who are in the process of being and becoming not only Christian, but good grown-ups who take up responsibly to be Christian in the face of American Christian Nationalism and be a people who defend the right to breath and life of all persons.

Engaging in this work and challenging the congregation to take up a deontological individual ethic has been one of the most clarifying (in terms of what I believe it means to be Christian) and one of the most painful experiences of my life (in terms of seeing many in the congregation refuse any norms about human dignity or human rights and also feeling little to no compulsion to take up responsibility to care for or defend the rights of the neighbor or the

⁶² Sara Wilhelm Garbers, "On Keeping Warm Through the Night," Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light *Firelight* (December 4, 2017), <https://sarawg.com/2017/12/04/on-keeping-warm-through-the-night/>.

stranger). I am grateful for the support of those who have helped me to keep on showing up, preaching the vision of a call to discipleship, living a faith that sees, remembers, and acts as a responsible “grown up” in a diverse world in need of good grownups who defend the rights of everyone to breath, making possible justice in and through the work of a church that brings life and honors life in opposition to dehumanizing machinations of American Christian Nationalism.

To pray you open your whole self
To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon
To one whole voice that is you.

And know there is more
That you can't see, can't hear;
Can't know except in moments
Steadily growing, and in languages
That aren't always sound but other
Circles of motion.

Like eagle that Sunday morning
Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky
In wind, swept our hearts clean
With sacred wings.

We see you, see ourselves and know
That we must take the utmost care
And kindness in all things.
Breathe in, knowing we are made of
All this, and breathe, knowing
We are truly blessed because we
Were born, and die soon within a
True circle of motion,
Like eagle rounding out the morning
Inside us.

We pray that it will be done
In beauty.
In beauty.

—Joy Harjo, “Eagle Poem”⁶³

⁶³ Joy Harjo, “Eagle Poem,” in *Mad Love and War* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan, 1990): 65.

CHAPTER NINE

SOCIAL DEONTOLOGICAL ETHICS:

JUSTICE AND GARDEN LIVING

Ring the bells, this time I mean it
Bid the hatred "fare thee well"
Give back the pieces of my Jesus
Take your counterfeit to hell
Bang the drums, this means war
Not the kind you're waiting for
We say mercy won't be rationed here
That's what we're fighting for

If all is fair in love and war
Then what the hell is loving even for?
If we can't sing it loud enough
We'll keep on adding voices up

Ring the bells
Ring the bells
Ring the bells
Ring the bells

—Johnnyswim & Drew Holcomb and the Neighbors, "Ring the Bells"¹

Introduction

In this final chapter I explore the ways in which I draw upon a social deontological ethic of political responsibility throughout my sermons. I highlight the tension between legal justice in the state and justice in the moral sense. I call the church to resist American Christian Nationalism and to positively act as a critic and leavening agent against the state wherever it fails

¹ Johnnyswim and Drew Holcomb & the Neighbors, "Ring the Bells," track 1 on *Goodbye Road*, Goodbye Road, 2018, compact disc (cd).

at enacting justice amongst all people.

This chapter is important for offering an alternative vision to American Christian Nationalism, for a social deontological ethics of political responsibility is where the church becomes political: critiquing the systems of power and unjust laws (instead of being strange bedfellows with these agents of injustice). Here I explore how God as Jesus, Emmanuel God-with-us functions as a model for the church in the vein of New Political Theology.² I then explore how I call the church to be a people of the kingdom of God where there is no king but *YHWH*, arguing that this kingdom is better conceived of as a kin-dom following the work of Ada María Isasi-Díaz.³

Next, I take up explorations of the ways in which the Christian vision of freedom and justice as *mishpat* all function to call the church to political responsibility and the building of the beloved community through the work of jubilee. Not only is this a call to justice, but, more deeply, it is a call to *shalom*. This is a kingdom marked by our invitation to “garden living,” bringing forward the promise of the Garden of Eden into our world today; as the church, our political responsibility is to bring the world and unjust systems closer to the garden reality where humans are able to walk with God and one another without fear and at peace with all of creation. To take up this political responsibility to work toward justice must be the work of the church at a time when Christianity is most known for being complicit in preserving systems of injustice and oppression.

² Though, unlike Bonhoeffer, Sölle, Moltmann and others, my focus on Jesus is not just on the cross but on Jesus as the one who through his life, death, and resurrection is an embodiment of justice who critiques empire.

³ See: Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*.

Jesus: Emmanuel, God-with-us

Chains shall he break, for the slave is one of us
 And in God's name all oppression shall cease.
 Christ is the Lord, oh praise his name forever.
 Christ is the Lord, oh praise his name forever.

—Adolphe Adam, “O Holy Night”⁴

I turn to Jesus as Emmanuel, God-with-Us because Jesus offers an important challenge and corrective to the vision of God as Divine Sovereign who is at the center of American Christian Nationalism.⁵ Instead of God being the Sovereign Father who grants us and people like us god-like status and authority in the world, in Jesus, God comes to the world in the vulnerable skin of a human, born in Bethlehem.⁶ It is God in Jesus who, as he begins his public ministry, threatens Empire and any pretensions toward power, actively calling the people to the remembrance of the words of Isaiah, naming his public ministry as that of caring for the poor and

⁴ Adolphe Adam, “O Holy Night,” Based on a poem by Placide Cappeau, Translated by John Sullivan Dwight, 1843, 1847. Gender inclusive language is mine.

⁵ The Baylor Religion Survey asks people to respond to the following questions in order to discern prevalence of American Christian Nationalism: (1) “The federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation.” (2) “The federal government should advocate Christian values.” (3) “The federal government should enforce strict separation of church and state.” (4) “The federal government should allow the display of religious symbols in public spaces.” (5) “The success of the United States is part of God’s plan.” (6) “The federal government should allow prayer in public schools.” See: Whitehead and Perry, *Taking Back America for God*, 8. For more see also: Haker, “Justice in History,” in *Towards a Critical Political Ethics*.

⁶ As I have shown in the first part, especially chapter 1 and 6, God as the Sovereign Father is predicated upon a self who is formed through an authoritarian faith that is rooted in following an authoritarian God. (See: *Ibid.*, 17). The “us” fundamentally and dominantly assumes whiteness. As Whitehead and Perry note: “Christian nationalism, especially when it is held strongly by white Americans, appears to reinforce boundaries around national group membership, encouraging antipathy and mistrust toward those who do not meet the membership requirements of *native-born, Christian, and white*—namely, racial minorities, nonwhite immigrants, and Muslims.” (*Ibid.*, 16.) “*Why did so many conservative Christians vote for, and continue to support, Donald Trump despite his many overt moral failings?* Contrary to the dominant narrative offered by pollsters and pundits, the answer isn’t simply “white evangelicalism” or “conservative Christianity.” Rather, we will show that Christian nationalism motivates Americans—whether they are evangelical or not—to see Trump as the defender of the power and values they perceive are being threatened.” *Ibid.*, 16.

the oppressed and bringing the year of Jubilee and God's favor.⁷ Jesus comes to town on a donkey and symbol of peace. Jesus does not retreat to the desert or withdraw from society for long, but rather engages it. Jesus turns the world upside down by journeying the way of love. Through his life, death, and resurrection, he shows that another way is possible and calls his followers to likewise become a body politic who stand in critique of the machinations of the state wherever it dehumanizes and thwarts life. Thus, we too as the church are to be the leavening agent in society, calling it to account wherever and whenever the political is unjust.

In seeking to be Christian and be the church, I ask the congregation to follow Jesus who was crucified not as an atonement for our sins, but on account of his being a threat to unjust political systems. An example of my work of employing Jesus as a political figure comes from my sermon on Maundy Thursday of 2018:

Last Sunday, for Palm Sunday, we were reminded of the God who came in, not on a war horse, but of the God who came on a donkey (no, not the donkey named Peaches who was here with us on Sunday). A God who came in peace, a God who we call the Prince of Peace.

For those of you who weren't here, or for those of you who are in need of a reminder: the time in which Jesus came to earth was a time in which the Jews were under the rule of the Roman Empire, longing for hope and freedom. Once again, as they had when they were enslaved in Egypt, they cried out to God: "Save us! We're expecting a Messiah to throw off this empire which kills and destroy us!" And in comes the "King of the Jews"...riding into town to overthrow the Roman Empire...on a donkey.

Now of course, many thought Jesus would overthrow Rome. And on Palm Sunday we are reminded that they thought he would come and bring peace through war...but that didn't happen. And so tonight on Maundy Thursday we are gathered to

⁷ I will say more about Jubilee later in this chapter. In the Gospel of Luke it is recorded: "(Jesus) went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. The Lord has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'" (Luke 4:16-21, NIV, quoting the Septuagint version of Isaiah 61:1-2 and Isaiah 58:6)

remember that this is the night when Jesus is betrayed. He's beaten. He's handed over to the authorities to be put on a cross, an instrument of shame and of torture.

All this is to remind the Jews, “We have the power. We have the power over you. What foolishness is this God?! You thought you were going to win. And now look what happened! Your messiah ended up on a cross!”

Could you imagine the pain and sorrow and grief so many must have felt?

This is why, when I think about the cross, I'm reminded of a powerful text by a black theologian here in America, James Cone. It's called *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.⁸ In the book Cone makes connections between the cross and what it meant to Rome, and what the lynching tree meant in a particularly violent period in the history of this country after the civil war as blacks were lynched and ruled by Jim Crow laws and segregation. Cone argues that there are profound echoes between the two symbols of the cross and the lynching tree. Both are an instrument to say, “Remember, we have the power. We can steal your life. We can destroy it.”

But what foolishness is this? A cross. A lynching tree. Could salvation come to us from these places? And yet this has been part of our story. It's a story of a God who took on human form, who came and walked amongst us, who overcame the world...not through power or strength, but by Spirit.

The Easter story is a story of a God who said a profound, “Yes!” in the face of the instruments of death that were meant to say, “No.”⁹

Later that year, I was asked to co-preach on Christmas Eve and further argued that Jesus as Emmanuel, God-with-us, brought and brings to us a deeply political message that critiques injustice in our world.

In this passage, we see the contrast of darkness and light, of anguish and hope, of people who are longing in the midst of the night.¹⁰ In the midst of oppression, of war, there comes assurance. Assurance of liberation from the evil Assyrian Empire of the day. Not maybe the most Christmas-y message...(but) here's the thing about it: This is actually an

⁸ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.

⁹ Wilhelm Garbers, “The Foolishness of the Cross.”

¹⁰ This sermon was based off Isaiah 9:2-7 (NRSV): “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who lived in the land of deep darkness, on them a light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy. They rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest. As people exalt when dividing plunder for the yoke of their burden and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the trampling warriors, and all the garments rolled in blood, shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us. A son given for us. Authority rests upon his shoulders, and he is named wonderful Counselor, mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be an endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forever more. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.”

incredibly Christmas-y message, because we know the realities of the world around us: realities of war and violence, of poverty, of sexism, and injustice. And we, in each of our own ways, long for redemption.

This is the God who—on this night—we remember as Emmanuel, God-with-us. This is the God who shows up in the real of human history and reminds us that hope isn't something for a far-off kingdom or time, no, hope is the promise and the whisper of God's Spirit throughout not only all of time, but the promise and whisper that we come to hear this very night in the real of our lives. This is the God upon whose shoulders all things rest. This is the Prince of Peace, the mighty God, the wonderful Counselor. This is the God who will show up. This is the God who shows up. Not in the way of mighty forces that we might expect, but in the form of an infant born through a woman, comes the redemption of people that they had longed for throughout the years. "For unto us a child is born."¹¹

So on this night, I don't know what you bring into this space. I don't know what political realities, or family situations, or jobs, or anything that you may be carrying, but I do know this: this is a God who throughout all of human history has shown up as love.

The God who is with us. The God who is for us, the everlasting one, inside of history, meeting us in the real of our lives.

Not the one who comes to wage war, but the one who brings peace, peace to our nation, peace to our world, peace to our homes and our bodies and our hearts and this earth. So on this night, as we sing, "Come oh, come, Emmanuel." And as we, together with church throughout all of human history, affirm, "For unto us, a child has been born." I pray that this peace might be yours. For Emmanuel is, Emanuel was, and Emmanuel will be.¹²

Not only at Christmas but also each year during Lent, I am struck by the political message of Jesus and its critique of politics as usual. Thus, every year I have pressed our congregation to see Jesus anew—not as a savior for our individual sins but as one who was viewed as a threat to the power establishments: he of whom the Roman Empire was afraid. I often preach about how we too often think that Jesus arose in power and how not only does this idea not help us personally,

¹¹ Referencing Isaiah 9:6-7 (NRSV): "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders, and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Great will be his authority, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this."

¹² Sara Wilhelm Garbers, "For Unto Us a Child is Born," Sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, December 24, 2018, <https://sarawg.com/2018/12/24/for-onto-us-a-child-is-born-a-christmas-sermon-from-isaiah-92-7/>.

but politically it forms us in much more problematic ways. It forms us so as we attach ourselves to political power and long for it instead of seeing and conceiving of how truly radical Jesus was and the ways in which his actions while on earth were not just about being nice to people but were acts of justice and making things right *politically*. One of the places I have turned to with regularity is that of Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. In my Lenten sermon during 2020 I do so, connecting this imagery with Zechariah 4:6: “Not by power, nor by might, but by my Spirit.”¹³

For it isn't by power, no—it isn't by might that we win. It's by love, it's by spirit, it's by breath, it's by awakening to the world as God has created it, to join with God in care and concern for all of our neighbors, to truly love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Yes, the book of Zechariah isn't a place where we often turn inside of the Christian imagination. In fact, in the lectionary, which is a tool that's utilized by churches around the world to help us cycle through reading the Bible, there's only one part of the entire book of Zechariah that is read in public worship: Zechariah 9:9-12. In the section of the text, there's a really interesting line where Zechariah, probably second Zechariah, names that they are prisoners of hope.

What I think is interesting about this is if you turn in your Bible and go read that part of Zechariah, you'll see that it depicts the imagery that we see of Jesus on Palm Sunday, which we're coming to next week, where Jesus comes in as the Messiah, the promised one, riding on a donkey...and imagine for the people at that time what they must have thought. They know this story from Zechariah 9; they know this oracle.

They know how this is supposed to go...the Messiah is going to come and overthrow the empire, and here comes Jesus riding on the donkey. They think: “Here we go. Jesus is coming! He's going to overthrow the Roman Empire. He's going to start a revolution and win. The promised freedom is going to happen!”

But if you look at Zechariah and the story that the people were anticipating versus what Jesus *actually* does, you'll see that Jesus absolutely *does* embody the first verses on Palm Sunday through to Easter, but when you look at the second section of that passage, you see that Jesus *doesn't follow the script* for there's this sense in Zechariah 9 that when the Messiah comes, there will be a violent overturning of the ways of this world and that is the oracle that the prophet hopes and longs for...as do people in Jesus' time (as we do too, right?).

¹³ The full verse reads: “This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts.” (Zechariah 4:6, NRSV)

And yet, as was pointed out in a commentary on *Working Preacher* by Margaret Odell, there's something important about this “prisoner of hope” line in verse 12 because it isn't the kind of normative hope we read about in scripture, which is the waiting for God to show up. No, the word here for hope is *tiqveh*, which is connected to false expectations. Dr. Odell thus invites us to see that verse 12 names the sense that the people and the prophet had that God would show up and overthrow the unjust empire, which is precisely what the people at Jesus' time were hoping for. For once again, the people of Israel found themselves underneath the rule and occupation of a foreign nation. This time it was the Roman Empire. So when Jesus comes into Jerusalem—as we will celebrate on Palm Sunday—the people spread their cloaks, crying, “Hosanna, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord,” they're thinking Jesus is going to come and get rid of the Roman Empire... but yet that's not what happens. When Jesus comes, he comes riding on a donkey of peace, not on a warrior horse, and in so doing Jesus reminds us about something that Zechariah 4:6 already told us: That God's coming isn't by power or by might, but it is by Spirit that God shows up. He is the one who will “proclaim peace of the nations; the empire stretching from sea to sea, from the river to the ends of the earth (Zech. 9:10).”¹⁴

Now, of course, when you have a narrative that tells you that the kingdom coming comes through power, then it's profoundly disorienting and it's scary and risky to all of a sudden be invited into a different type of story. So it's no surprise as we look forward to Palm Sunday that the people who say, “Hosanna, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord,” very quickly thereafter, were plotting to kill Jesus once they realized that the kind of kingdom that Jesus was bringing was not one of power, not one of military strength, nor one of revolutionary violent rebellion, but was one that was more beautiful and more fraught and more of hope and possibility...pregnant with new worlds that together as the church and the people of God, laboring with God's Spirit, we have been able to midwife throughout history.”¹⁵

In Jesus we have a God-image that disrupts the notions of God as the Sovereign One, or as the conquering son. In Jesus, God is vulnerable, a threat to Empire, and one who in his life and death and resurrection embodies a profound critique to the systems of injustice and shows that another way to be human and order our social relationships is possible.

¹⁴ Margaret Odell, “Commentary on Zechariah 9:9-12,” *Working Preacher*. July 6, 2014. https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2142. Sermon: Wilhelm Garbers, “Hope Interrupts Power.”

¹⁵ Ibid.

The Role of the Church: Critique

Rise up
 If you livin' on your knees, you rise up
 Tell your brother that he's gotta rise up
 Tell your sister that she's gotta rise up
 When are folks like me and you gonna rise up?
 Every city, every hood, we need to rise up
 All my soldiers, what's good?
 We need to rise up
 We ain't got no other choice, we need to rise up
 Rise up!

—Hamilton, “My Shot”¹⁶

One of the most dangerous aspects of Christian Nationalism is the way in which it robs the church of its central role in the world: to stand as a critique of the state and society wherever it is unjust and robs people or creation of the conditions necessary for life. In Christian Nationalist ideology, however, the “Manifest Destiny” and sense of being a “City on a Hill” collapses the church and state into one of cultural theocracy (even in the midst of supposed pluralism and democracy). In this way, the church is compromised by its reaches for power and loses its ability to function as a leavening agent.

Contra Hauerwas, who argues that the church’s response to Empire and pluralism ought to be that the church becomes a community through narrative and story, it is important here to name that we are *not just called* to be a people formed by a story but to be a people who are obligated to defend the rights of others and to then also to act and intervene in society wherever it is unjust. This means that we are not called to sectarian withdrawal but to political action and resistance in the vein of the Catholic Church during El Salvador’s Civil War, the Civil Rights

¹⁶ From the musical Hamilton. The song is “My Shot.” Miranda, “My Shot.”

Activists in the United States, or those who even today provide water and solidarity with migrants in the Texan desert.¹⁷

The idea that the church's role is to critique and move against injustice and constructively to fight for justice is pervasive throughout my sermons. This is the case because of the ways in which Christian Nationalism has shaped my community both historically and up until this time where a significant portion of the long-term members are subscribers to Fox News and media that consistently talks about "the left" trying to keep us from being a Christian nation.¹⁸ The other reason I work so hard in my sermons to uplift the political sphere and the work of justice as a part of the work of the church is because of the ways in which the historically dominant faith stream in the church is one that has privileged privatized faith or the more mystical dimension of faith but has less consciously focused on the political and critical political ethics.

I first preached about political responsibility for the church in June of 2018, turning to Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church and also the work of Reinhold Niebuhr:

The Confessing Church existed as a critique of the Lutheran State Church, which in many ways was completely wedded with German nationalism. The Confessing Church said, "We may be German, but we are first citizens of heaven, and our call and our role is to be people who follow Christ above all things." Bonhoeffer wrestled with this throughout his career, which was short-lived, as he was killed the day before the Allies liberated his prison. I bring up Bonhoeffer, because I think his life offers an invitation and a challenge to all of us to wrestle with what does it mean to be Christian? What does it mean to live

¹⁷ See: Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 2003). Regarding those who provide water to migrants at the border see (for instance): Bonnie Shaw, "Texas Baptists Churches and Ministries Respond to Del Rio/Acuña Border Crisis," Texas Baptists (September 22, 2021): accessed online <https://www.texasbaptists.org/article/texas-baptists-churches-and-ministries-respond-to-del-rio-acuña-border-crisis>. Also: Maria Cramer, "Judge Reverses Convictions of Activists Who Left Water for Migrants," New York Times (Feb. 5, 2020), accessed online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/05/us/tucson-border-activists-conviction-reversed.html>.

¹⁸ For a good example of this, see: Whitehead and Perry, *Taking Back America for God*, 23-25.

in a world where there are political divides, but to be people who, as we breathe in the Spirit, we breathe out the love of God and the vision for God's kingdom in our world?

...Reinhold Niebuhr was featured on the cover of *Time* in 1948...just a few years before I was born (well, close to 35, actually!). Reinhold Niebuhr was a pastor, professor, and public theologian. He worked during the early 21st century when there were significant divides in our culture and in the church. In his earlier work he sought to challenge Christians and the Church to hold this space between the divides of his time: the modernist/fundamentalist divides. In the early 20th century, part of the church reacted to modernist assumptions with a fundamentalist rejection of science, reason, and assumptions about the world and knowledge as they were changing in culture. This part of the church (think of the Scopes Monkey Trial) was withdrawing from culture saying, "No, we don't want anything to do with science and culture!" And Niebuhr critiqued them, but he also critiqued the liberal church at his time who, he believed, had forgotten their rootedness as Christ-followers, and instead merely preached a social gospel that was rooted in an overly optimistic view of humanity.

Niebuhr challenged the church to be the church, to be rooted in the "perfectionistic ethic of love of Christ."³ And then, to wrestle deeply with what does it mean to follow Christ in their time. He was a contemporary of Barth who is famously known for saying, "hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, and you pray and you discern that God will give you wisdom for how to be Christian."¹⁹

I love Reinhold Niebuhr's work because it challenges us that we are supposed to be a people who are rooted in our faith. We are supposed to above all strive to embody a vision of the kingdom of heaven here on earth. And together we wrestle with that. So that's one element that I want to pause and bring into our conversation. For as we wrestle together with being Christian, we ask ourselves: "What does the love ethic of Jesus invite and call us to as we live our lives together, as people who are deeply rooted in scripture and committed to being Christian in our time?"²⁰

¹⁹ Though even the Center for Barth Studies is unsure of exactly where this popular quote originated, they offer the opinion that it came from a *Time* article from Friday, May 31, 1963 which reads: "[Barth] recalls that 40 years ago he advised young theologians 'to take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible....Newspapers, he says, are so important that 'I always pray for the sick, the poor, journalists, authorities of the state and the church - in that order. Journalists form public opinion. They hold terribly important positions. Nevertheless, a theologian should never be formed by the world around him - either East or West. He should make his vocation to show both East and West that they can live without a clash. Where the peace of God is proclaimed, there is peace on earth is implicit. Have we forgotten the Christmas message?'" See: "Where Does Barth Say?" The Center for Barth Studies, accessed June 16, 2018, <https://barth.ptsem.edu/frequently-asked-questions/>.

²⁰ Wilhelm Garbers, "Breathe Out."

In pressing the church to take up the political call to responsibility, I was aware that I would receive push back for my efforts to challenge us to engage in justice work and address this head-on in various sermons:

Now you might be thinking, "Sara, why are we talking about all this stuff about ethics and politics?" That's a valid question. So often in our world we treat the word "politics" like it's a dirty word, as if it's something antithetical to the life of faith. You might hear it and think to yourself: "Oh, I want to stay out of politics, I just want to follow Jesus!" And while I respect your heart in that, if this is true of you, I want to challenge us today that if we are going to *breathe out* faith, we have to care about ethics and politics because the call to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves demands ethical living and political response, for how we live with one another is the sphere of politics. Jesus himself came on a donkey, refuting the vision of the political salvation that people thought would happen. He came in, in a different way, and we too are invited and indeed called to be Christian in our time, which is a call to political responsibility. For as Dietrich Bonhoeffer has said, to not act is to act, to not speak is to speak.

And so, as Christians, we are called to not just breathe in God's love, but to breathe it out in our world; to wrestle deeply with what it means to show up and respond, to be Christian in our world. For although to be Christian is NOT to be partisan, it is always a call to be political, for the loving of our neighbors demands ethical, political responses from us.

May we be a people who continue to invite and challenge ourselves related to our policies, to ask ourselves how we are or are not integrating the Biblical vision, the Biblical story into how we live and respond to the gospel with our lives in building the kingdom of God. Do your political positions reflect the gospel? How are they shaped by your faith? What is the Christian source for your opinions about the economy, housing, food, climate change, migration, reproductive rights, and the like? Of course, none of our politics or policy positions will be able to fully reflect or represent the full vision of the Christian faith, as we live in a complicated and broken world, but our faith ought to stand in deep challenge and invitation to us in forming our way of being human and living our faith in this world in this time.

To be Christian is to be political, it's not to be partisan....to breathe out faith is to live our lives in response to the call and challenge to be people of the gospel.²¹

The Kingdom/Kin-dom Centered on *YHWH*

Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for

²¹ Ibid.

And no religion, too
 Imagine all the people
 Livin' life in peace

—John Lennon, “Imagine”²²

There are twin aspects of the Kingdom of God that call to and shape the Christian and the church. The first is that at the center of all of life and how we are to move in the world is *YHWH*; this relationship alone and primarily defines who we are to be and how we are to be in the world. The second aspect relates to how the language of kingdom can (and must) be understood if the church is to function as a critique to the operation of American Christian Nationalism in our world.

YHWH is CENTER

If being a Christian demands political responsibility, the first political work of the Christian and the Church is to disentangle from the notion of the political inside of American Christian Nationalism. To do so requires a multi-sequence dance. Having argued that critique is central to what it means to be the church by way of political action and this is a necessary part of Christian ethics, the alternative vision for the political is to place God is at the center of our social and political relations.²³ *YHWH* must be center and this inverts the understanding of what king and kingdom can and must mean in order for the kingdom of God to be realized. An example of my critiquing the role of Donald Trump in American Christian Nationalism as a way

²² John Lennon, “Imagine,” track 1 on *Imagine*, Ascot Sound, 1971, compact disc (CD).

²³ For more on how *YHWH* as center functions for the Hebrew people, see: John Day, *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

of highlighting that God is supposed to be center was in a sermon I preached on Deuteronomy 10:12-22 in 2018.²⁴

This text also aims to encourage the people to take up the responsibility to live out a particular way of being in relationship with *YHWH* God. Now here's one of the things that I think is really cool (and I hope you get really excited about it too!): The thing that you might not know about Deuteronomy is that Deuteronomy is put together in a way that reflects and mirrors the covenantal treaties that would have existed at that time in the Ancient Near East.²⁵

...Here's why I think this is so cool. Given that this book takes the standard elements of a treaty and the people, it then can be read like a treaty or a covenant between God and God's people. As such, it's a way to make clear that it is not an external king—the promise of God isn't for a king like David or Solomon—that's not the point. The point for the people of God is that the only true King EVER is *YHWH* God. The one that we are primary relationship with is supposed to be *YHWH*. **Period.**

And the book of Deuteronomy calls to them (and us): “As you go into the land **do not forget** because you're going tempted to become like the other people, to want to King to rule you. But don't forget though that *YHWH* alone is King.”

You know how Christians often say, “Jesus is Lord.” This language echoes what is happening in Deuteronomy and is found in the language of the early church and in Jesus' own words...**to say that “Jesus is the Lord” means Caesar isn't.** This is why the

²⁴ “12 So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all God's ways, to love God, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and God's decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. 14 Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God, and the earth with all that is in it, 15 yet God's heart has been set in love on your ancestors alone, and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. 16 Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. 17 For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, 18 who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. 19 You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. 20 You shall fear the Lord your God; God alone you shall worship; to God you shall hold fast, and by God's name you shall swear. 21 God is your praise; God is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen. 22 Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons; and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars in heaven.” Deuteronomy 10:12-22 (NRSV)

²⁵ Though Deuteronomy is not shaped as a treaty in its final form, the elements of the Suzerainty Treaty are present. Carolyn Pressler argues that the “treaty form influenced its authors. It may even have had the shape of a divine-human treaty earlier in its history (an earlier draft). PDM calls the suzerainty treaty the “submerged structure” of Deuteronomy.” The elements of a treaty between an overlord and vassal include: (a) Preamble. The sovereign identifies himself. (b) Historical Prologue. The sovereign describes the benevolent acts he has done for the sake of the vassal people. (c) Treaty stipulations. (d) Provision for depositing the treaty in a temple and for periodic readings of it (this is optional). (e) References to witnesses and (f) Blessings and curses. All are present in Deuteronomy. Notes from class. Carolyn Pressler, “Deuteronomy,” Lecture Notes for *Older Testament in the Life of the Church* (Winter 2011).

early church was accused of being insurrectionists and the like because they would always affirm that first allegiance always belongs to God.

That of course doesn't mean that there weren't still Jews and Gentiles in the early church. This doesn't mean that today there aren't Americans and Germans and Swedes. **But it does mean that we can't ever forget that the center of our being as people who claim the name of Christ is that we are Christian.** That the one with whom we are in fundamental relationship with, to whom we owe our loyalty isn't Barack Obama or Donald Trump. It's to God.²⁶

The Kingdom as Kin-dom

I want a house with a crowded table
 And a place by the fire for everyone
 Let us take on the world while we're young and able
 And bring us back together when the day is done

—The Highwomen, “Crowded Table”²⁷

If God is to be the center instead of human rulers, does this not just re-inscribe the same dynamics in our political arrangements? Will this result in just a divinized theocracy? Does placing God at the center of our political and social lives open up more hegemonic power relations with the world? It can indeed lead to this if not wedded with a particular vision of what it means to have *YHWH* at the center of our political lives. And indeed, if *YHWH* (who is the ground of being), if Jesus (God as embodied, vulnerable human) is at the center, then my next effort in cultivating an ethical paradigm capable of resisting American Christian Nationalism is to animate the contours of this kingdom which runs counter to the logic of American Christian Nationalism. Thus, to place *YHWH* at the center not only repudiates the historic notions of God as the Sovereign, but also presents an alternative vision that grounds political relationships in the

²⁶ “Strangers in the Land,” September 29, 2019.

²⁷ The Highwomen, “Crowded Table,” track 4 on *The Highwomen*, Elektra Records, 2017, compact disc (CD).

God who was crucified and a kingdom that came in secret, making possible just relationships amongst all of creation.

Thus, in a sermon on the end of the book of Mark, I argue that it is important to follow the manuscript evidence which suggests that Mark's gospel ends without resolution—for it is only later editors under the empire who wanted the good news to be triumphalistic—but God's vulnerability is vital for us to embrace if we are to live counter to injustice in our world:

Another big theme in the book of Mark is a depiction of **what the kingdom of God looks like**. As we spoken about on Palm Sunday and Easter morning, the revolution of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God is one that comes in silence. The revolution begins in a mustard seed. The Kingdom of God in Mark doesn't look like a kingdom that you'd expect; it's not a kingdom that overthrew the Roman Empire in a moment. Instead, this kingdom is headed by the King of the Jews... a King who was crucified.

The Romans say of Jesus in Mark 15: “He saved others but can't save himself!” “If you're the King of Israel then come down from the cross that we may see and believe!” Even in Mark 15:34 (unlike the other Gospels) Jesus cries out: “My God my God why have you forsaken me?”

Thus, there's a sense in Mark more than any of the other Gospels that the kingdom of God comes in silence; it comes secret; it comes in the quiet; it comes where God feels absent. So when we look at the whole of the text and the story Mark is telling us about Jesus and the Kingdom of God, it's not very surprising that it ends with “they were terrified” because the kingdom of God didn't appear to have won!

This is a book that's also focused on the end times, on Jesus as the deliverer of the people (this is what's called the *eschatology* of the book). But again, this kingdom looks different than you'd expect...it isn't obvious that God's promised coming wins the day.

To sum this up: I think that ending at verse eight is right because textually it seems to be the case and because it also resonates with the theology of the book of Mark that reminds us the Kingdom of God comes in the quiet, in the suffering—the Kingdom of God doesn't overthrow the Empire via force and wins right now. Of course Mark ends by telling us they were afraid, for **this** is the Gospel according to Mark. *And now let me say a little bit about why I think that this is actually really good news.*²⁸

²⁸ Wilhelm Garbers, “For They Were Afraid.”

I argue that this kingdom can better be understood as a kin-dom.²⁹ I turn here not as a way of reducing the political to the familial but to re-orient the political so that it is discovered in the personal and our inter-connectedness. From this place of common humanity and commitment to the care and well-being of the other, the kingdom of justice is opened up. Of the kingdom being a kin-dom:

Because here's the thing: in talking about the kingdom of God and what means for us to be a kingdom people and asking you to consider what you think this means, I'm wanting to bring us into another aspect of the kingdom of God, namely the idea that the kingdom that God brings isn't a kingdom of our imaginations with a king and a queen and a prince and maybe a Cinderella or something. No, this kingdom might more aptly be named a KIN-DOM: the place in the reign and the rule of God, which makes possible live-ability and familial ways of being that honor all of us. God's kingdom is actually a kin-dom where everyone is invited to come home and live as members of this family. Living kin-dom then is part of what it means to be a kingdom people.

Both of these authors, along with others, name concerns with us continuing to employ kingdom language that is shaped by and primarily understood first in human terms.³⁰ This is because for so long throughout human history, the way that we've organized ourselves is that there was a King, and then there were a bunch of serfs and folks who didn't have any power or rights. We see in the earliest accounting of God's people of Israel that God challenges them not to have a King, but to actually put the tabernacle at the center of their entire community because they were called to be different and place God alone at the center *but also* as reminder to them that another world was possible: a good news indeed to a people who only knew a world in which there were King and there were slaves and servants, a people who themselves had been enslaved for 400 years and only had known this existence, putting the tabernacle at the center of their social and political organization was intended to invite them to re-imagine what it might mean to be a people chosen and called by God, and re-orient themselves to how they could be free human people, in alignment with how God was interested in showing up in the world.

And how does God first show up in the world? We are told that God walked in the garden with Adam and Eve. Not incredibly kingly, right? More like a God who is interested being "God-with-us." We see this again then in the life of Jesus, that God puts on human form and comes to dwell amongst us. And so this language of "Kingdom of God," sometimes it gets us stuck where we then live out of faith that, instead of it being

²⁹ Again, following Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*.

³⁰ I am referencing: Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology* and McFague, *Models of God*.

faith that calls us to show up in the world as grownups, as people who take responsibility for our lives, as ones who know that the call to follow Christ is a call to freedom, we instead take on a new way of being that is patterned after the ways of being that our world already believes in. One in which we give away our power and remain stuck in the patterns of this world instead of being born again and again into new life and new ways of being human.

Kingdom language keeps us stuck thinking maybe one day Prince Charming will save us, but the kingdom that God brings is one in which we are already saved, one in which we are invited to fully rise up into the image of God that God has already placed uniquely within each of us. And then, as each of us rise up fully to be people who are grown up in our lives and in our faith—taking responsibility—we become a true kin-dom people who extend recognition, community, and love to and with one another.

So not only do I think this language of kin-dom is helpful, because it invites us to really live more deeply into the ways of God, to know in our bones that seashore promise that God wants for us, but I think it is fundamentally THE vision of what Jesus means when he teaches us to pray and live in such a way that “your kingdom might come.” . . .

And that is the command we are given: the command to love one another, to lay down our lives, to be friends with all of God's children, just as God has called and named us friends. No longer are we servants or slaves under some master. No, we are instead invited to follow brother Jesus in living in this new way of being. This is the command, this is the kingdom that we are invited into. It is an invitation for each of us to take up responsibility for our lives, to be a people who live with freedom, who seek justice and mercy as we walk humbly with God, who seek to fulfill the fullness of the law of love, which is that we do indeed lay down our lives for one another.

No longer are we people who just obey a king as his subjects. We are a people who are called to rise up, to take our rightful place in this family, and then to look around and realize that this is a world-wide, all of creation family where each of us are equals. We are siblings. We are a people then who are a kin-dom. The kingdom that God is bringing and has indeed already made present in our midst, is one of kin-dom. It is a promise that is for each of us. It is an invitation into a way of life and a way of being, and it matters for how we live our lives. For if we continue to live our lives in relationship to the invitation to faith as one that is framed by human models and metaphors of kingdoms, it will mean and results in anti-God's way of being.

When we are caught up in the limitations of our human conceptions of kingdom, it means that we will perpetually struggle to remember that the whole reason that we say “Jesus is Lord,” is because by doing so it means Caesar is not. And if we forget this and forget that the gospel invitation is into a family then we will keep on ordering our lives in response to earthly powers and imaginations and will give away our power to the kings of this earth who promise to fortify our egos and keep us from having to awaken to the seashore kin-dom family. For God's kingdom is a kin-dom where we're invited to take up the responsibility to love and lay down our lives. This kin-dom, this invitation that we have matters then also not just because we give away our power to external sources, but as the fairy tales suggest, when we are locked into human conceptions of kingdom and

think that following Jesus is like a game of Simon Says instead of an invitation into a family and a way of life, it fosters in us helplessness, like there is nothing we can do in the face of the evils of this world. So we then pray “thy kingdom come,” but we forget that Jesus isn’t Prince Charming, Jesus is the truth that animates our ability to live our lives in answer to the prayer and be a people who are bringers of the kingdom not just passive, helpless witnesses in view of the machinations of evil in our time.

This kingdom is a kin-dom where love is at the center, the center holds and then, as Cornell West reminds us, this love becomes the work of justice in the social and political spheres for “justice is what love looks like in public.”³¹

Jubilee: A Kingdom of Justice and Freedom

I've been standing in the welfare lines
Crying at the doorsteps of those armies of salvation
Wasting time in the unemployment lines
Sitting around waiting for a promotion

Don't you know
Talking about a revolution?
It sounds like a whisper

And finally the tables are starting to turn
Talkin' 'bout a revolution
Yes, finally the tables are starting to turn
Talkin' 'bout a revolution, oh, no
Talkin' 'bout a revolution, oh, no

—Tracy Chapman, “Talkin’ Bout a Revolution”³²

This kingdom where God is center is one marked by powerlessness and rooted in a kin-dom vision. It is a kingdom marked by love and justice, for these are central aspects of who God is. As Deuteronomy calls to the people:

The Lord your God, the Lord is one. And you should love this God with everything. And oh, by the way— don’t forget. Don’t forget how I’ve shown up in your life. Don’t forget

³¹ The full quote is: ““Justice is what love looks like in public, just like tenderness is what love feels like in private.” Cornell West, “Justice is What Love Looks Like in Public,” speech given at Howard University, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGqP7S_WO6o&t=21s. Sara Wilhelm Garbers, “The Kin-dom of God,” sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, July 19, 2020, <https://sarawg.com/2020/07/19/kingdomofgod/>.

³² Tracy Chapman, “Talkin’ Bout a Revolution,” track 1 on *Tracy Chapman*, Elektra, 1988, compact disc (CD).

the healing work I've done in your midst. Live from this place of remembrance so that you can live in resonance with this invitation to circumcise your hearts, to live in loving relationship with the God who is the Lord of all. To be the people who don't take bribes, but instead join God in the execution of justice of the orphan and the widow and the stranger, providing them food and clothing because we remember and because we pray and long for the day when indeed, those who know this great love of God are, indeed, far more numerous than the stars.³³

This is a kingdom where jubilee is the pathway into justice, a commitment to making things and the world right. I preach about jubilee:

And so every 50 years, the people are called to live in such a way so as to make possible the breathing space and the renewal of the people so that everyone can actually live free. For those who, because of circumstances in their life, for one reason or another, have forfeited their property and their inheritance, it is returned to them. For as a people to whom land mattered a lot to their wellbeing and survival in the world getting back their land changed everything. No matter the reason they had forfeited their land, Jubilee is the reset that, boom, elevates them to their right position again in society. Jubilee makes freedom possible.

And for those of us who over time in this land would have taken on as payment the land of another, we are then called to give back to them so that indeed the people of Israel could be a people who walked together as persons equally formed in God's image, as one's called to live in this land as a people of freedom. A people have this sort of promise. And so today, as we have celebrated and honored the movement of freedom in our world and particularly in our country, we're reminded that to be a kingdom people, to be a people of Jubilee and make freedom ring.

Jubilee reminds us that freedom isn't something we capture at once, but it is a promise that we live. It is a prayer that we answer by walking out faithfulness. Jubilee is the embodiment of that which we pray each week: "God, that your kingdom would come and your will be done here on earth." Freedom isn't ours, even though it is, it's not fully. And so we continue to move in rhythm and dance with the God of all freedom who hears the cry of God's people, whether that was from thousands of years ago or whether it is from today. And whether that cry for freedom is one in your heart because of pain and trauma you have known, whether it is because of the reality of systemic injustice, these are all similar echoes and cries to one God, the Lord and God of all of us: cries for freedom and jubilee.

That's why I love this passage: At the beginning of the year of Jubilee, the shofar was to blow. This is the same shofar which blows on the Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. In fact, it's sound signals and invites us to see that individual liberation, that

³³ Wilhelm Garbers, "Strangers in the Land."

the atonement for our sins as individuals and as a community is fundamentally tied to the collective political and economic liberation for all of us. ...

And even while so beautifully, there is the Jubilee cry of shofar justice, we need to bring together these dimensions of the individual and the communal, the political and the spiritual for the Spirit transforms both individual hearts, but Jesus and the gospel is also fundamentally concerned with livability and justice for all of God's people and for this earth...and that these don't need to be in conflict.³⁴

And part of why we're doing this summer series on being a "Kingdom People," is because 98% of our lives are influenced by the new sources we watch, by the pop songs we listened to, and by our political party. But as a church, as people who follow Jesus, we want to be a people who are first rooted and grounded in what it means to be a kingdom people. We want to FIRST be a people whose cry for freedom is rooted in the God who has worked freedom for God's people throughout all time in history, freedom in every sense. For to encounter God is to have both our individual and our corporate and our collective and our societal lives changed. So that indeed, as kingdom people, we get to bear witness to a coming kingdom that is already here and in our midst.

This is why we say and we cry "freedom," for **this is** the kingdom cry of Jubilee!³⁵

Though the American white evangelical church does not speak about it, acting as if justice is only a progressive political agenda, these themes of justice and jubilee and care for the poor, the widow, and the foreigner are central to Israel's self-understanding. We too are then to be a people who work to make possible more justice and just conditions.

Does the scripture not talk about jubilee, about making things right, about caring for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the oppressed? That is not just "some political agenda." It's a vision of the God who is the God of all of us and wants us to be free in Christ. Now we're going to disagree about how to live that out, but let's wrestle together with the Spirit as the early church did. And of course, they didn't do that perfectly either. But do we mythologize these stories, make them abstractions, or will we let them translate into our

³⁴ For more on the shofar and justice see, for instance: Sarah Braka, "A Shofar Blast for Justice," *Columbia Spector* (October 17, 2020): <https://www.columbiaspectator.com/the-eye/2020/10/17/a-shofar-blast-for-justice/>; Robert Bank, "Awaken! Shofars Around The World Are Calling For Justice: A High Holidays Reflection," *American Jewish Service Blog* (August 27, 2018): <https://ajws.org/blog/shofars-are-calling-for-justice-a-high-holidays-reflection/>; Elizabeth Shulman, "Shofar," *The Cambridge Dictionary of Judaism and Jewish Culture*, ed. by Judith R. Baskin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 547, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.flagship.luc.edu/lib/luc/detail.action?docID=1744019>.

³⁵ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, "Freedom: The Kingdom of Jubilee," sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, July 5, 2020, <https://sarawg.com/2020/07/05/freedomjubilee/>.

time? Will we live our faith as a both/and of private and public lived out life? Will we continue to let the cross and the spirit and this community and other believers shape and challenge and invite us to see things anew? And will we be willing to risk, to refuse the ways in which our current times seek to keep us separated, and in so doing, seek to become Christian?³⁶

Fundamentally, Jubilee is the way to ensure that everyone can actually live free. For those who, because of circumstances in their life, for one reason or another, have forfeited their property and their inheritance, it is returned to them. For as a people to whom land mattered a lot to their wellbeing and survival in the world getting back their land changed everything. No matter the reason they had forfeited their land, Jubilee is the reset that elevates them to their right position again in society. Likewise today, I wonder what it might mean to be a people of Jubilee, a people who take seriously the harm of student and global debt, a people who how reparations might be a moral call to live Jubilee in our time.³⁷ For Jubilee makes freedom possible.

Jubilee reminds us that freedom is not something we capture at once, but it is a promise that we live, it is the execution of justice and the guardrails by which to ensure that justice persists. A freedom in which the bells ring, the trumpets blast, and the good news is proclaimed: “It is for freedom that we have been set free!” This is where the role of the church moves from being one of critique to being one that engages in the work of justice to aid in the reset of unjust structures. Our name change is one step in a longer call and work to which our congregation will need to engage in order that we might join the call of jubilee liberation.

³⁶ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, “Who To Listen To,” sermon given at Meetinghouse Church, Edina, MN, May 1, 2022, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/who-to-listen-to-sara-wilhelm-garbers/id1512364728?i=1000564737895>.

³⁷ Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *Atlantic* (June 2014): <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.

Freedom is thus achieved and made possible through justice. And justice makes possible true peace, for when there is justice, there is freedom and freedom makes possible peace.³⁸ So instead of turning to a strong man to save us, as so many Christian Nationalists do with Trump, we are called to turn back to *YHWH*. The kingdom of God and the vision for justice is fundamentally rooted in who God is—and the problem happens/injustice arises when we look to others to save us instead of rooting ourselves in a vision for *shalom* and *mishpat* where God is at the center of all things.

Mishpat is way of understanding justice as the doing of justice, of according to people the rights they are due as God's people, as children made in God's image. Throughout the book of Isaiah, two conceptions of justice are wedded together: *mishpat* and *tzedek*. While *mishpat* is a sense of a justice that is the rightness of life together (the legal sense) and also the sense that each is due certain rights or obligations as part of the community. This is then put together with *tzedek*, a conception of justice, which is sometimes thought of as the plumb line (moral justice). It's the through line, the way that we are rendered just, justified, sometimes translated into English as “being rendered righteous.”

It's another way of understanding this dual conception that if love looks like both the relationship between us, within ourselves, and in relationship to God, that love and justice are also opposite sides of the same coin. The ways that we who know what love looks like we work for that with our neighbors. This is then a justice that is both us justified in our relationship to God (*tzedek*), but that calls us to embody a justice (*mishpat*) in the way that we live and order our lives one with another.³⁹

And the church is called to be nothing if not this: the people whose following of God so orients them that it is the place where the truths of all Advent and Christmas songs come to be realized—the coming of peace and rightness for all because God is amongst us. We are called to

³⁸ As the cry goes: “No Justice, no peace!” and “Know justice, know peace.”

³⁹ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, “The Law is Love,” sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, December 13, 2020, <https://sarawg.com/2020/12/13/the-law-is-love-a-sermon-on-luke-1025-28/>. Legal justice is *mishpat* and *tzedek* is moral justice. See, for instance: Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Jill Jacobs, *There Shall Be No Needy: Pursuing Social Justice through Jewish Law & Tradition* (Woodstock, Vt: Jewish Lights Pub., 2009).

be the bringers of this kingdom here on earth. The bearers of *mishpat* who seek justice and make for its possible realization in the world.

Indeed, another world is possible. And in saying this I name the central vision and prayer I have for my work in this community: namely, that in the time of American Christian Nationalism, that another world is possible, that our church might help to bring about spaces where the justice of God's shofar blows and freedom comes for all of the people—a freedom that makes the world a place of justice because jubilee sets is aright.

Shalom

When we made it back home, back over those curved roads
that wind through the city of peace, we stopped at the
doorway of dusk as it opened to our homelands.
We gave thanks for the story, for all parts of the story
because it was by the light of those challenges we knew
ourselves—
We asked for forgiveness.
We laid down our burdens next to each other.

—Joy Harjo, “Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings”⁴⁰

As we are called to be a people who seek justice by critiquing systems of injustice in our world and imagining a “reset of injustice through the idea of Jubilee, we are to be about the work of building a world where *shalom* is the norm.”⁴¹ In the Hebrew imagination, *shalom* is about more than peace: it is about a deep and fundamental well-being. This is the place where there is not just justice, but there is a true peace between and amongst all people.⁴² This is the promise

⁴⁰ Joy Harjo, “Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings,” in *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), 84.

⁴¹ Wilhelm Garbers, “Freedom.”

⁴² For more on *shalom*, see: Perry B. Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace* (Eugene,

and vision of the kingdom of God in the Bible, and it is the work the Christian is called to be about and the church should be known for. The church is not to seek creation of a theocracy but is to function as a leavening agent in our world, as a fierce defender of the rights of others. Thus, the call to Christians is not to evangelize but to self-formation as disciples of Jesus. By doing this work we might be truly Christian and then positively join with others in the work of ensuring human rights, dignity, abolition, and justice for all.

Whether we go way back to the story of the God who heard the cries of God's people when they were enslaved in Egypt and brought them out of that land into the promised land and freedom, or the stories we know of how when the people were in the promised land and they had forgotten the God who saved them and forgotten their role as the people of God in the land and they again experienced enslavement at the hands of the Babylonian Empire and then the Persian Empire...this was a story of a people who knew oppression and longed for freedom in all of its forms.

Of course, the story doesn't end there because by the time we get to Jesus' time, the Jewish people are living under Roman occupation. And in this environment, they were an enslaved people, they were oppressed, they didn't have the same rights as the Romans, and this is the context into which Jesus is born....

On Palm Sunday, when the people experienced Jesus entering the city, it is clear that they think his coming will be the triumphant moment when God and the promised Messiah will save them in every single way...because inside of Jewish thinking, the way salvation comes, *Shalom*, God's peace, it comes as a holistic salvation that frees us spiritually, politically, and psychologically so that we can live as God's people.

They are longing for *Shalom-salvation*.

As an oppressed people they had been crying out to God saying, "God, do you not hear us? Will you not save us?" And they've heard rumblings of this radical man who feeds the many, walks on water, performs miracles, and heals those outcasts by society. And you've got to think so many of them are exclaiming, "This is the guy!

This is the Messiah! Did you hear? Do you know? He's coming to Jerusalem. Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" and they lay down their palm branches (scholars think that palm branches were a symbol of the Maccabean rebellion and any depictions of palm branches were a signal to let people know, "The revolution is coming!"). They think Jesus is going to overthrow the Roman Empire through political revolution and bring them freedom.

Now, of course Jesus is all about the revolution. It's just not the kind that they (or we) think it's going to be, right? Because the way that Jesus shows up and the way God's kingdom works is that it doesn't function according to the normative power politics of our world (right? Jesus comes on a donkey, not a war horse), which in some ways isn't that different today from back in the day during the Roman Empire. We too so often look for Jesus in power and political revolution that we recognize as such, but God's kingdom works differently than that. Its revolution comes by Spirit and brings true *shalom-salvation*.⁴³

Garden Living

Do you know this story, the story of Furiosa in Mad Max?

In a post-apocalyptic desert of a world undone by climate change, people became things as the earth already had. The resources were controlled and scarce and humans became consigned to roles, life and humanity stolen from them.

Furiosa devises a plan to steal the women who were forced to be breeders of the new humans for this desolate land.

She's taking them to the land of her mothers.

They write on the wall as the exit: "We are NOT THINGS."

I wear that saying on around my neck on days when I need to remember:

We are not, this earth is not thing.

It is subject, meaning its own entity in the construction of not only sentences but also in respect of this: subjectivity that resists objectification.

So we say: "We are NOT things. We are not objects for using."

"This earth is not a thing | some object for using."

And when Furiosa realizes that the land of her mothers is gone, she weeps in a guttural way that is not allowed for a woman on screen.

And after the weeping: they go back to the place they ran from.

They return to overthrow the one who cosines all to be things in a universe of scarcity and objectification. And when this happens, well... there is water enough for all to drink.

—Sara Wilhelm Garbers, "Writing for a Storm"⁴⁴

⁴³ "Grace Actually Sees," April 19, 2020. My thought here arose from conversation with Pope Francis' Encyclical "On Care for our Common Home." It got me thinking about the work of Jesus not as a sacrifice for our sins, but as the one who reminds and calls us all home to the garden and the way we were meant to live with God and one another in vulnerability and without shame. See: Pope Francis, and Kevin W. Irwin, *On Care for Our Common Home: the Encyclical Letter Laudato Si'* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2015). This theology was also shaped for me by the work of Brené Brown on shame. See: Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Gotham Books, 2012).

⁴⁴ This was part of a post that originally appeared on Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light. See: Sara Wilhelm Garbers, "Writing for a Storm," Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light *Firelight* (September 14, 2018),

Fundamentally, with Jesus as the God image who can animate this political theological ethics, it is important to name the final aspect of Jesus as a political figure—that his work of salvation is not about atonement but about inviting people to all come home, to join the kin-dom and to become a people who live in the garden, a people who work for rightness and the care of all of creation as we tend to it.⁴⁵ Turning to the garden as the location for animating a social deontological ethic of political responsibility is to affirm: (1) all of creation matters, including us; (2) we've forgotten that we were intended to walk in such a way so as to live beyond shame and fear and self-preservation, but to walk in vulnerability and connection one with another; (3) that Jesus wants to invite us all home; (4) that this invitation back to the garden is the way that the kin-dom then invites us forward to plant our gardens and live the revolution of love and justice and *shalom*.

The Biblical vision is clear, going way back to chapter one of Genesis, right? Where does the story start? It starts in creation. God creates the heavens and the earth and all living things and there's day and there's night and they're separated from one another. There's fish and there are all kinds of animals. All of this creating happens and God says it's *really good* **before** we humans even show up. And yet when we do, when the earth creature is formed from out of the dust of the earth, the earth creature is *not given a task to rule over, but to care for*, to restore the goodness of God's creation that God has made. This witness of God as Creator is one that is echoed throughout the text of our Scriptures. The Psalms again and again, name God as the one who is the creator of the heavens and the earth, the wonder and the marvel of creation.

The book of Colossians also names, that by God all things were created in heaven and in earth: “For by God all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created by God and for God.” (Col 1:16)

<https://sarawg.com/2018/09/19/writing-for-a-storm-six-moments-of-grief-and-resistance/>.

⁴⁵ The Garden here refers to the Garden of Eden first and then to bring that forward to our lives and the literal garden of this earth.

So central to our faith and our way of being in the world should therefore be a commitment to a belief that God is the Creator of all things. And if God is Creator, does that not invite something from us to honor the creation? For in so doing, we honor the God who is the creator of all of life. This should be one of the central aspects of our understanding of what it means to be a Kingdom People: we are a people who get to partner with God the Creator, the creator of all life and become people who foster the conditions of life and of creation both in ourselves and in the world that God has fashioned....

This is the vision of the God who makes all things new, and not in a way that obliterates it the world, but a newness that allows it to freely flourish in the ways that God intended. This vision of the “new things” is shared then in Isaiah and throughout the Bible (Isaiah 65:17-25 and 43:18-19); this is the vision of the God who is making things new who is about setting things right, about the kingdom coming indeed, here on earth, as it is in heaven.

Revelation’s vision is about God's reign, God's way of being, as being present in us and in the world. And so this vision, when it happens is of a new heaven and new earth, the Jerusalem where there is no more crying. It's the place where we get to walk back home to the garden, to the place where we were meant to live. It's this earth as our garden home.

Sallie McFague talks about how, if you break down the word *ecology* in Greek, it's really just the word *oikos* meaning home and *logos* meaning word. It's connected to our words, ecological, ecumenical, and economic, and, as McFague argues: if salvation is seen as the flourishing of God's household, then we must see these three words as being held together for, at its simplest, ecology, is words about home.⁴⁶

And what does John remind us about in his gospel? That in the beginning was *logos*, the word, the word that calls us home to know how to live rightly in this world and in relationship to the earth and to one another. Hence, being people, a kingdom people who care about and are committed to the flourishing of all of creation, isn't some New Age theology. No, instead it's a return to the fundamental cosmology that we were meant to live within: where we live as a people who walk with God and one another in this creation, cared for by it and caring for it as well.

As I noted earlier, how we see God and how we see ourselves matters. Are we willing to live inside of a vision where we are called to be people who live out a *home word*, an ecology, an economics that is connected to the care for the whole of the household, where we are stewards? We are called to care for this household of which we are a part. This is the dream of the mountain top joining with God's dream, for a kingdom and a world and a vision like Revelation...a vision of a new heavens and a new earth, not in a retreat back to garden, but a new city where God dwells amongst all of God's people and all of the land, such that this world is not destroyed, but that it is instead restored.

Revelation 21 through 22 offers us a wonderful eschatological, meaning the end and the way in the being of all things, where now those of us who joined together with

⁴⁶ Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 33 and 48.

God get to know a land and a place where the earth is cared for, where lions and lambs lay down with one another, where there is no more crying and we cease living as people in exile in Babylon, meaning people who have forgotten the garden way.

Might we be just such a people, a Kingdom People, a people who don't seek to preserve ego or live so as to have power and dominion over one another and over creation, but instead to be a people, a Kingdom People, people who join with the God who makes all things new.

To be a Kingdom People calls us to live our lives and order ourselves toward action, to have a theology that then invites us out into the world. As theologian John Caputo writes, "The love of God is something we do namely to praise God and have compassion for the world."⁴⁷

We are all invited to come home and to then live from that place—being bringers of home, and in so doing, we make possible just conditions that are necessary for life like Jesus did in relationship to Zacchaeus:

Zacchaeus was a tax collector. Now, one of things in this time that made Zacchaeus such a concerning character for so many other Jewish people is because he represented someone who in so many ways betrayed his people in order that his life might flourish.

So a tax collector was in that inner mediating space between the Roman overlords of the Roman Empire and the Jewish people extracting high taxes from them in order to fund this oppressive empire under which they were living. That was the reality in which Jesus was born, was the time when the Roman Empire ruled over the Jewish people. And they longed for freedom in the spiritual sense, but in the political sense. In every way, they were longing for that. So here's this man in the middle of Luke's gospel that represents so much that the people wanted freedom from: freedom from unjust taxation, freedom from this external authority. And then also Zacchaeus I imagine wanted freedom as a just real person in his own heart and his own soul...

And so these people came out to the streets expecting and anticipating all sorts of different things. But by and large, most of the people thought that part of the promise that God had made to them was that they would then be free spiritually, politically, et cetera. And so here's this Jesus, a prophet telling them, "This is the story of God and what God's up to." And you better believe that a lot of people came out on that street expecting a political revolution.

They come out and they think, "okay, here's the guy." Maybe some came just as spectators. Maybe some were afraid. Maybe some were energized. People were looking for different things. Maybe some thought Jesus was this amazing teacher. And they just wanted to hear what he might say. They all came though with different ideas about who

⁴⁷ John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 141. Quoted in: Wilhelm Garbers, "A New Heavens and a New Earth."

Jesus was. Zacchaeus, we're told, gets up in the tree because there's a huge crowd. Can't see. I don't know if he was short or it was just a lot of people. Either way, he decided that he was going to get up in the tree to be able to see Jesus and Jesus passing him, sees him, he cognizes him and invites him to come down from the tree.⁴⁸

And when Zacchaeus comes down from the tree he then vows to pay back anyone he has cheated and to alter alter his career and behavior. We are thus called to come down from our trees and the places where we have participated in injustice and to then, together, join as the church to be a part of centering Jesus and working to be bringers of the kingdom that is a kingdom marked by equality, justice, freedom, peace, and home living—a place and a world of more justice for all.

Being thus formed, the church is to enact political responsibility, to march, to agitate, to cry out, to take up the task of critiquing the state whenever and wherever the law fails to be that which ensures justice. In this way, the church can and might become the church in the face of American Christian Nationalism.

⁴⁸ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, “The Rhythm of Almsgiving,” sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, April 10, 2022, <https://sarawg.com>.

CONCLUSION: FROM PLYMOUTH TO PROVINCETOWN

THE POETICS OF A FUTURE NOT OUR OWN

For through the law, I died to the law so that I might live to God. I've been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live, but it's Christ who lives within me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God. For if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing. You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified. The only thing I want to learn from you is this. Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?

—Galatians 2:19-3:3 (NRSV)

Last summer I preached through the book of Galatians, arguing that at the heart of the letter is a conflict between who was to be included in the community of followers of The Way.

Part of what's been going on in this community is that there is an inner struggle about what it means to be Christian. And in the early church, they're wrestling with questions of identity, culture, and with this new thing that is happening in their midst. Some of the new Christian leadership is arguing that in order to be Christian you need to become Jewish. If you're a man, you need to get circumcised. And so, for them, they're saying, "this is what it looks like to be culturally Jewish, to follow in the ways and the practices that are familiar to us. And Paul, in his very docile, very quiet way (sarcasm)... Paul writes to say, "What are you doing?!" He basically is yelling at them through this letter: "What are you doing!? Are you serious? This is actually a thing of freedom for you!" Because as it turns out, the people distributed through Galatia weren't all from Jerusalem and weren't all Jewish. And he was saying, "Listen, the beauty of the gospel is that you encountered Christ in your own skin and your own story. Don't quit being who God made you to be and following Christ in the midst of your story."¹

I revisit this sermon for two reasons. To begin with: I think the conflict at the center of Galatians echoes in the conflict at the center of Christianity in the United States today: will the church in

¹ Sara Wilhelm Garbers, "Live Toward God," sermon given at Colonial Church, Edina, MN, July 18, 2021, <https://sarawg.com>.

America be one that is marked by exclusivism, seen in American Christian Nationalism with the devastating effects of its of white supremacy, anti-women, anti-queer and anti any perceived “other” stances OR will we be marked by a different story that breathes the same spirit that Paul reminded the Galatians to live by? The second reason I revisit this sermon is how I turn to the place where I wish to end this dissertation: it matters where we start the story.

American Christian Nationalism is grounded in a story about the mythologized founding of our nation as a “City on a Hill” at Plymouth Rock. It is a story of white settlers who were called by God to fulfill our “Manifest Destiny,” and is one in which the genocide of native persons and genocide and enslavement of black persons is obscured or outright denied. It is one in which patriotism and Christianity are wed together, rendering the orphan, the widow, the foreigner, the migrant, the queer person, the woman, and the “liberal” all dangerous outsiders. It is a Christianity that privatizes our love of Jesus, a Jesus who has been robbed both of his racial and ethnic identity and his radical political message.

So, in calling people to be and become Christian in the face of American Christian Nationalism, following the God who is not the Divine Sovereign (white) Father in the sky, but the God who is *YHWH*, *Ruach*, *El Roi*, and Jesus—Emmanuel—God-with-us, I am asking American Christians (particularly white ones) to live out a different faith and a different story. We can and must tell a different story about the founding of our nation, which interestingly, this different story is also the more true story of our nation, its founding and its history.

As I noted in my sermon last summer, the Christian story of the Pilgrims does not begin in Plymouth but in Provincetown. My dear friend Rosita and I ended an East Coast road trip there last summer and it was one of the most profound experiences of my life.

Our final leg of the journey ended in Provincetown, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod. I had never been to Provincetown and didn't know a lot of its history. It was actually just this last year I found out that five of my own family members came across on the Mayflower! I didn't know that because I was raised in my mom's Swedish family, which only came to the United States two generations ago. So it was interesting for me to be able to go to this place, not knowing its significance in the Pilgrim account. I had heard of Plymouth and Plymouth Rock since I was a kid and thought this is where the Pilgrims landed in the United States as I was told the tale about how we befriended the native persons and had this lovely Thanksgiving.

But what I didn't know, what no one had ever told me was that Provincetown and Provincetown Harbor is actually where the Pilgrims first landed and the Mayflower Compact was signed...not Plymouth.

Some of you may already know this history and may also know that since the late 1800s Provincetown has been a haven for artists and a safe space particularly for gay men. When Rosita and I went to Provincetown, and walked up and down the streets, it was filled with people in a way that I hadn't seen since before COVID. There was so much freedom and beauty and celebration in a way that I had never seen as gay men and other queer people felt a freedom that they don't have anywhere else. And I was reflecting again about the call to live toward God, and what it means that we are invited to be a people who live freedom. And I was thinking about my own generational story and the story of Christianity throughout history. I was reminded of how the first Sunday I came to preach here, I had a sense that I carried in my story the generations of congregational women, including those who were killed in Salem in my story and that in coming here to this congregational community I was getting to experience freedom in my skin to live the Gospel in a way that those killed in Salem hadn't.

And that day, walking down the pier in Provincetown with one of my dearest friends in the whole world, as the sun was setting, I had this deep sense of God saying, "Sara, this is what the kingdom looks like." Because you see, just two days before that, I'd found out that after over two years of trying to get pregnant again, having lived through miscarriage and two years plus of infertility, having found out that 0% of my wonderful spouse's sperm were properly shaped (rendering him infertile). We didn't think we were going to be able to get pregnant, and that may indeed have been our story. But we found out that we were, and we had found out the very week I was traveling out East with Rosita that the genetics assessments had come back positive for low risk. And we had found out that we were pregnant with a baby whose sex was female.

For me, part of what I mean when I say I was walking the streets and realized it was the kingdom of heaven resplendent with rainbow flags, streets where indeed, some of my ancestors had actually walked, and then had lived a complicated and at times profoundly problematic, at times beautiful legacy, just like the church in Galatia, that I was getting to have the opportunity in my life to continue to explore what freedom and what it means to live toward God. Because for generations in my family, women got married because they were pregnant beforehand. They lived in relationships in which they weren't seen. Women throughout the story of even congregationalism weren't always allowed to do what I am doing today. But that day, I got to put my hands on my belly and

say to that human, "Whoever you are and whoever you will become, I want you to know that I will love you."

That is part of the legacy of this story. That we are called to be a people who, as we turn ourselves toward God, that healing comes, that freedom comes in our own skin. And then we get to walk the streets with one another and proclaim that this is a freedom for every person in every skin of every tribe and every tongue and everybody, because it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. That freedom didn't begin or end when people landed on this country and it doesn't end today. It didn't end in Galatians, and Paul today echoes forth a word to us that says: "open our whole selves to the Gospel of freedom!" And might we then be a people who now live toward Christ.

In telling the story about Provincetown, it allows us to imagine another kind of Christianity. But it also must be a story in which Christianity takes up responsibility for many violences rendered in the name of our faith—both on our soil and around the world. This learning to be formed by another story and letting the story call us to repentance and change is, following Bonhoeffer, the work of discipleship.

The church in America is at a *kairos* moment—the Spirit has been crying out from the ground and through the cries of those who demand for justice. As the church we must decide if we will listen and which story we will live in response. Might it, indeed, be a story that is one not of power but of Spirit, of the God who cares for the widow and the foreigner and the migrant. Might it be the story of a church birthed in diversity, a church marked by love for the neighbor and a commitment to doing the work of justice as we walk humbly with our God.

In these past years I have learned many things. As a white American I am aware that I long to have a beautiful story about both the world and my country. I want my faith and my people always to be the heroes and I wanted this dissertation and my work at the church to be one in which I did such a great job at painting a compelling picture of an inclusive and life-affirming Christianity that everyone would jump on board.

This tells you too about my story, socialization, family of origin, and psychological formation, for I must continually do work to recognize and live under the knowledge that I cannot save or fix anything. But I can keep on bearing witness to the worlds that I believe in. And so, in many ways I have come of age in these years and on these pages and through the sermons and struggles. I have come to realize the importance of resilience in the work of justice and find myself repeating the poem of long-time Provincetown resident and poet Mary Oliver: “Things take the time they take. Don’t worry.”² And so in this way, I realize that the story of Christianity and of my nation and of our lives they are not to be told, and not to be heard like fairy tales. There are no princes who will save us, no fairy godmothers, no omnipotent white dads in the sky. But something more human, more fleshy, more liminal, more insidiously evil, and more gloriously beautiful is the truth of our story.

I’ve learned that this story is tentative— it is one in which, as the poem/prayer in honor of Oscar Romero notes: “We are Prophets of a Future Not Our Own.”

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.
 The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.
 We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent
 enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of
 saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.
 No statement says all that could be said.
 No prayer fully expresses our faith.
 No confession brings perfection.
 No pastoral visit brings wholeness.
 No program accomplishes the Church's mission.
 No set of goals and objectives includes everything.
 This is what we are about.
 We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
 We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.
 We lay foundations that will need further development.
 We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

² Mary Oliver, “Don’t Worry,” in *Felicity* (New York, Penguin Books: 2015), 3.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
 This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.
 It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an
 opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.
 We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master
 builder and the worker.
 We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.
 We are prophets of a future not our own.³

The project of Christianity in the world is an unfinished story, one in which “we are prophets of a future not our own.” Our work is to take up our pens and write, to take up our hearts and love. To do what we can. And then to trust. For we do not write alone. We write together. For this work is a collective work and this story is the common story of humanity struggling to be and become human. My job as a Christian feminist theological ethicist and minister is to be a prophet who calls us to the Kairos, reminding us of the story that is good news for those longing for justice and bad news for those who want the fairy tale that maintains the status quo.

After the first vote when the name change at our church failed, I curled up in a ball on my floor and wept—I wept for the history of Christianity that up until today keeps far too many people locked in hatred of themselves and others. In my mind’s eye I saw the images of genocide and violence that has been done under the banner of the cross. I listened to the song “Give Me Doubt” on repeat as I cried and despaired for the future of the church more broadly. The words echoed: “Give me doubt so I can see my neighbor as myself/Give me doubt so I can lay all weapons on the ground/When the armor of God is too heavy for peace, give me doubt/Give me

³ Cardinal Dearden, “Prophets of a Future Not Our Own.”

doubt...what be my courage now, my shield from evil/Love be my courage now/ I shall not fear.”⁴

Through the support of friends and those who believe with me that another Christianity is possible, I was sustained. My friend and native activist Jim Bear Jacobs called me almost every Friday and buoyed my soul and body. And I have become more fierce and also more soft through this process. I have grown so much as a person and a scholar. As I have wrestled in my work to find new language and to build constructive frameworks that might aid both myself and the broader church, my ethical language and positions have deepened. I have become more committed to the work of formation and self-formation. I have also become convinced about the vital necessity of speaking of rights, responsibilities, and justice in our time. Being able to bring together the work of ministering and preaching with this dissertation and having the ethical reflection from my practice has enriched my work in all spheres of my work. For all of this I am truly grateful.

This fall I was able to help to launch a new service at our church where we are trying to animate the agency and voices of those who gather together to try and be Christian. We play music that you hear on the radio and invite people to speak in their own voices and tell their own stories, trying to develop a new theological language taken from the rubble of everyday life, making the altar our daily lives and concerns, hoping beyond hope that it might be possible to be and become more human and more Christian, even in the face of American Christian Nationalism.

⁴ The Brilliance, “Give Me Doubt,” track 1 on *Give Me Doubt*, The Brilliance, 2020, Spotify Streaming Audio, <https://open.spotify.com/track/3RwvpvCfJj0kHsQvDj83YSX?si=20efb7a2d30b45e3>.

It is time for the church in America, and particularly those of us who are white Christians, to be and become Christian, to stand up and resist, to remember, and to be grown ups who take up responsibility to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

May it be so.

Hands to the Heavens, no man, no weapon
 Formed against, yes glory is destined
 Every day women and men become legends
 Sins that go against our skin become blessings
 The movement is a rhythm to us
 Freedom is like religion to us
 Justice is juxtapositionin' us
 Justice for all just ain't specific enough
 One son died, his spirit is revisitin' us
 Truant livin' livin' in us, resistance is us
 That's why Rosa sat on the bus
 That's why we walk through Ferguson with our hands up
 When it go down we woman and man up
 They say, "Stay down", and we stand up
 Shots, we on the ground, the camera panned up
 King pointed to the mountain top and we ran up

One day when the glory comes
 It will be ours, it will be ours
 Oh one day when the war is won
 We will be sure, we will be sure
 Oh glory (glory, glory) Oh (glory, glory)
 Now the war is not over, victory isn't won
 And we'll fight on to the finish, then when it's all done
 We'll cry glory, oh glory (glory, glory)
 Oh (glory, glory)
 We'll cry glory, oh glory (glory, glory)
 Oh (glory, glory)

Selma's now for every man, woman and child
 Even Jesus got his crown in front of a crowd
 They marched with the torch, we gon' run with it now
 Never look back, we done gone hundreds of miles
 From dark roads he rose, to become a hero
 Facin' the league of justice, his power was the people
 Enemy is lethal, a king became regal

Saw the face of Jim Crow under a bald eagle
 The biggest weapon is to stay peaceful
 We sing, our music is the cuts that we bleed through
 Somewhere in the dream we had an epiphany
 Now we right the wrongs in history
 No one can win the war individually
 It takes the wisdom of the elders and young people's energy
 Welcome to the story we call victory
 The comin' of the Lord, my eyes have seen the glory

One day when the glory comes
 It will be ours, it will be ours
 Oh one day when the war is won
 We will be sure, we will be sure
 Oh glory (glory, glory) Oh (glory, glory)
 Oh glory (Glory, glory)
 When the war is won, when it's all said and done
 We'll cry glory (glory, glory)
 Oh (glory, glory)

—John Legend and Common, “Glory” from the Motion Picture *Selma*⁵

⁵ Common and John Legend, “Glory (From the Motion Picture *Selma*),” single on *Selma*, Columbia, 2014, Spotify Streaming Audio, <https://open.spotify.com/track/2fmqPLRFdJNPhLU3b2NSFp?si=f7529934cee54d48>.

APPENDIX A
INDIGENOUS LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Meetinghouse Church (formerly Colonial Church) sits on stolen Dakhóta (Dakota) land. The Dakota people's cultural history begins at the confluence of the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers, a sacred place called Bdóte.¹ To try and name the history of this land demands an acknowledgement that the granting of statehood to the land of my birth (accomplished in 1858 during the lead up to the US Civil War) was predicated upon genocide and erasure of Native persons.²

When our church was built it was upon pylons that dig into the earth below as we are situated on a native wetland space.

The work of this dissertation, my ministry at the church, and the efforts at changing our name are all just pieces of continued work to tell honest stories and honor the spirits of native persons who were unjustly killed and harmed on this land in the name of Jesus.

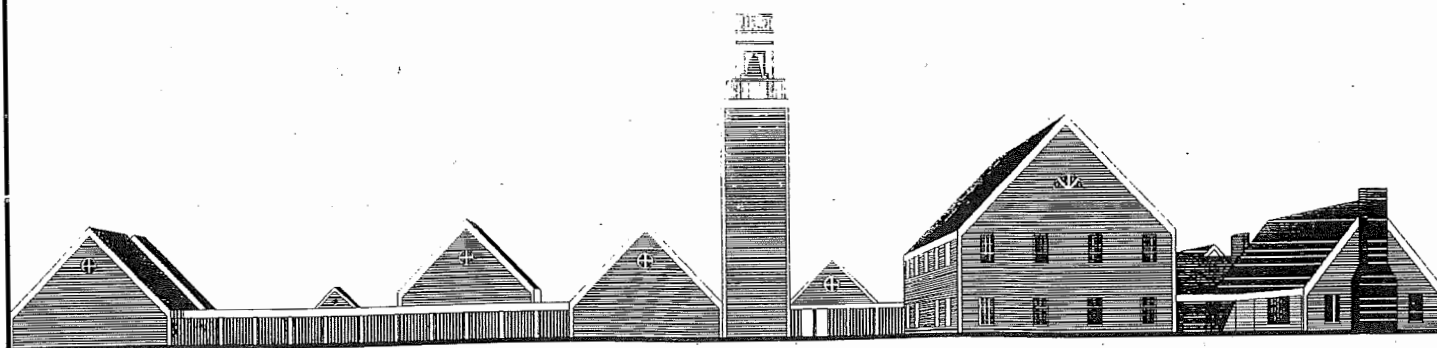
¹ This confluence of the waters is thought to be the birthplace of the people, the origin of life. For more on the history of the Dakota in Minnesota, see: Pond and Anderson, *Dakota Life in the Upper Midwest* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1986). See also: "Native Nations of Minnesota."

² Historian Chad Montrie names this as the state's "the first racial exclusion." Montrie, "A Bigoted, Prejudiced, Hateful Little Area": 5.

APPENDIX B
THE COLONIAL CHURCH OF EDINA
A LOOK AT FIFTY YEARS
1946-1996

The Colonial Church of Edina

A Look at Fifty Years
1946 - 1996



In the Beginning

Everything comes from somewhere. So it is with The Colonial Church of Edina. Its history goes back to the early part of the 1900s, when the Union Church of Edina was organized on June 8, 1902.

In 1904, on November 11, the Union Church purchased Lots 10 and 11, Block 5, Crock's First Addition, from William F. Bowers of San Francisco for \$200.00. The congregation first borrowed \$500.00 and later \$400.00 from the Congregational Building Society and erected a frame church building, most of the work being done by members of the church.

In 1932, the church building was abandoned and services were held in the new Wooddale School at 50th Street and Wooddale Avenue in Edina.

In 1934, on May 25, the congregation voted to merge with the Morningside Congregational Church.

In 1941, the Minneapolis Congregational Union commenced discussions of its rights and responsibilities in rapidly growing Edina.

A Union appointed committee, in 1941, was charged with the job of investigating the possibility of a church in Edina under the direction of the Rev. Nels F. Nordstrom, Director of the Minneapolis Congregational Union.

On April 13, 1944, the first meeting of the Wooddale Avenue Committee was held. Members of the committee were: L.A. Dyregrov – chairman, August Denk, Bower Hawthorne, Morton Johnson, York E. Langton, Leslie A. Rossiter, William M. Steinke, George A. Willson, Herbert Drews and Phillip W. Smith.

A church survey of Edina south of 50th Street was authorized. The survey results were favorable. The state superintendent was instructed to search for and recommend a minister to enter the field.

What was happening in the world at this time?

1945

Germany surrendered to the allies on May 7, bringing to an end the Nazi tyranny.

Japan collapsed after the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The United Nations was launched at San Francisco.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt died on April 12.

Harry Truman became the 33rd President of the United States.

1946

It was at this time that the Rev. Kenneth E. Seim was chosen to bring into reality a new church in Edina. The choice couldn't have been better. This slim, serious, youthful looking, 37 year old was a native of Vienna, South Dakota. Educated at Huron College, the University of Chicago and the Chicago Theological Seminary, he was ordained and served in Wessington Springs, South Dakota in 1930. His pastorate was at Tallmadge, Ohio when he came to Edina in January of 1946 with his wife Joyce and their two daughters. The challenge that faced him was to build something out of nothing but a dream. His first job was to ring doorbells for three months to find people interested in forming a new Congregational church.

"I worked as any salesman would, knowing I had to make so many calls before I could find a prospect. It was like selling pots and pans," he said years later. "For every six calls I might find one prospect. I made 2,500 calls by the end of May."

It was enough to encourage him to move ahead to organize a new church. A steering committee brought the church into existence. These members were: Rev. Kenneth Seim, chairman; Bobb Chaney, secretary; John W. Windhorst, treasurer; Dr. K. Paul Carson; Mrs. Carl Westerberg; Mrs. Warren Kugler; Lee Short; Mrs. L.A. Wilson; L.S. Shepard; Bower Hawthorne and Mrs. George Willson.

The objectives of the new church were carefully thought out and presented in a bulletin, which stated the purpose of the church:

"The Colonial Church of Edina is a community church of the people. It is a church welcoming all in worship, a church offering friendship and

the happy companionship of kindly folk to all who gather in common interest. It is a church of our children, our families and our neighbors, for only by service to all the people of this community can the fullest good be derived."

Mr. Seim noted that the name did not mention any denomination. "We wanted to be a community church. We have worked toward that end." He added, "What we had in mind when we chose the name 'Colonial Church' (on March 24, 1946) were our colonial fathers, their ideals, hopes and prayers for the nation. Once we had that name, it solved our architectural problems."

The covenant of Colonial Church is a passage taken from the Cambridge Platform, the document that set forth the practices of Congregationalism in America since 1648.

At the first worship service held in the gymnasium of the Edina School on Wooddale Avenue on March 31, the first hymn sung by this newly formed church group was, "The Church's One Foundation." The attendance was 87, with six children.

The first election of officers was held and Dr. Clayton G. Rudd was elected clerk; Chesley F. Carlson, financial secretary; and John W. Windhorst, treasurer.

At the formal services of recognition on June 9, 12 ministers from the area participated. Fifty seven charter members were received into membership. The Rev. Mr. Donald J. Cowling gave the sermon, "Religion and the Problem of Living Together."

It was agreed to extend the period for charter members until November 2. At that time the total reached 135.

A group calling themselves the "Colonial Couples" was formed on September 26. These young marrieds met at the parsonage at 4506 Oak Drive for their social hour.

The Pilgrim Fellowship for teenagers was formed, as was the Women's Federation, which held its organizational meeting at the Hasty Tasty Cafe on 50th Street and France Avenue on November 20. Forty one members of this group formed two circles: Virginia Circle and Priscilla Circle.

The choir was formed this year. It boasted little more than a quartet. There were five members.

Included in "firsts" were the first two roses on the chancel table, which were in honor of Colonial's first babies: Mary Candice Carson, born June 13, 1946, and Susan Irene Palen, born July 16, 1946.

Prayer At Closing of Charter Membership Rolls

Our Father, Who dost ever rejoice as Thy children confess before the world their desire to follow Thy way, Who wilt ever strengthen the holy desires of those who wish to make Thy blessed will known to all the world, look with joy and understanding upon all who are the charter members of this church.

In the years that lie ahead may we be the stones upon which the spiritual and physical growth of Thy church depends. May we grow in grace as each passing year makes our love for Thee and Thy church stronger and greater. May no misunderstandings fray the bonds of love which we have established here in this our fellowship, but rather may there be love and understanding, mercy and forgiveness, the tear of sympathy each for the other.

O God of the ages, if it is Thy pleasure, may this Thy church grow in spirit and strength. May her power be for good in this community and the world. May she be a blessing to infants baptized in Thy Name, to youth confirmed into Thy fellowship and to love consummated into marriage. May she be a haven of refuge for those who suffer, a constant beacon for those who have lost the light of faith, a surety and comfort for those called to their eternal home.

Father, make us ever mindful that all has been done for Thy honor and glory and may our constant prayer ever be that Christ shall be the chief cornerstone of the spiritual structure we have built.

In His Name we pray. Amen.

Members were informed as to what was going on in the church by the church bulletin. The first one was printed in August and was called "The Colonial Spire." In his first letter to his flock, Ken Seim wrote:

"The first issue of our church paper may not rock the world..." but it did inform its members as to how the church was faring. There were now 96 members on the church rolls. One half came from ten denominations in and about the city and from seven

Congregational churches. Forty four were accepted by confession or reaffirmation of faith.

As the membership grew, so did enthusiasm for a building which could be called their own. Property on Wooddale Avenue and 56th Street in Edina had been acquired in the first months of 1946. It was a

wooded lot with a frontage of 270 feet and a depth of 245 feet, encompassing one and one half acres. A Finance and Solicitation Committee was appointed with York Langton serving as chairman. Working with him on this drive were Harold Young, Paul Carson, Harold McCreight, John Windhorst, Mrs. Bobb Chaney and Mrs. Bower Hawthorne.

Dr. William Denison of Dayton, Ohio came to direct the \$65,000 drive for funds. York Langton remembered these high-powered meetings. Dr. Denison faced them with such questions as, *"How much do you spend for liquor? For tobacco? For entertainment? How many of you have ever built a new church? Haven't you always used a church that someone else has built? Don't you owe something to the Lord for your good fortune and success? Have you ever thought of being a tither and giving ten percent of your earnings to the Lord?"*

"After we had listened to Dr. Denison for four nights in a row, we were sold on our duty to help build this church," York Langton remembered with a smile.

It was a successful drive and \$30,000 was pledged in an all out concerted effort by dedicated parishioners. The rest was to come from the community and the Congregational Union, which helped new churches get started.

A Church Building Committee was appointed whose members were: John Windhorst, members of the Board of Trustees and the Building Fund Committee, Mrs. Carl Westerberg, R.L. Parker, Mrs. Lee Short, Mrs. J.O. Tews and Mrs. Carl R. Carlson.

This first building (*"we weren't thinking of any future buildings at this time,"* said Dr. Paul Carson) was to include a south wing which would house a place of worship for 118 people. It would have a pastor's study, an office and a nursery. Things were beginning to move as the little church faced the coming year.

1947

The Marshall Plan to aid stricken European countries was considered the most successful of the administration's foreign policies.

A young Irishman from Massachusetts, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, was elected to his first term in Congress.

At Colonial, the first confirmation class was confirmed on May 15. The confirmands were: Robert Borey, Allan Anderson, Carolyn Coon, Jean Bohne, Phyllis Bailey and John Rossiter.

On July 8, Dr. Paul Carson was appointed the new Building Committee chairman to replace the vacancy left by Sheldon Johnson who resigned due to business pressures. Additional land was purchased adjacent to the building site.

At this time the membership was 182.

The church budget was \$8,696.

1948

This was the year of the Berlin Blockade. The U.S. Airlift kept the city supplied.

On March 8, religious education in the public schools was declared to be a violation of the First Amendment by the Supreme Court.

At Colonial Church, the groundbreaking for the new church was May 9. As the building began to take shape, it became a testament to the dedication of its small congregation who pitched in to help in every way.

The church building was of red brick with white trim, similar to the early American churches. It had white pews and chancel furniture trimmed with walnut. There were white shutters on the windows, a wooden canopy over the pulpit and a white cupola atop the church.

The men of the church, under the direction of Melvin Holter, made most of the furniture in the Holter's garage. These men, Phillip Bailey, Pat Hennessy, George Willson, Beech Wheeler, Ed Dailey and Dr. Paul Carson, spent their evenings after work from 7:00 until 10:30 for three months carving and pounding and sawing to create the furniture. They made pews and chancel furniture, the pulpit and

communion table. The wooden offering plates were carved by Dr. Carson, who also fashioned the weather vane rooster which still stands today. He remembered the donuts that came from the Holter kitchen to revive the weary men as they labored.

The dossal cloth behind the pulpit was sewn in the Carson living room. *"And when we put it together, it was over ten feet high, we found that we hadn't matched the nap and had to rip it all apart,"* Mary Carson remembered. *"It was a wonderful group of people to work with,"* she said fondly. *"We had great fun."*

Talents people never knew they had surfaced. Retired school teacher, Frank Trafzer, got a new lease on life in his role as historian. He shared this job with his wife, Blanche. Between them, they created a stunning copper book holder which contains the names of the charter members. The clipping books made of wood with brass corners and leather thongs evidence the loving care that went into this job.

The men's organization, which was formed on the heels of the first service, found an appropriate name, "The Minute Men." They became the backbone of the church in helping to raise money for various needs. They also sponsored Boy Scout Troop #87. A yearly event, the sale of Christmas trees, became a tradition in the church. In 1948, the Minute Men's Christmas Jubilee Dinner cost \$1.00.

Dr. W. Ernest Collins came to Colonial Church to inform members about a merger which was being considered between the Congregational and Evangelical and Reformed churches. Members were asked to cast a ballot regarding such a merger. On March 28, the congregation voted in favor of the merger. This, however, did not commit Colonial Church to the merger in any formal way.

The building program was underway. John Windhorst, an attorney, was the "spark plug" for the program, according to Ken Seim. He did all the legal work for the church, putting in countless hours as he kept the little church afloat. He was chairman of the Board of Trustees, and taught junior high Sunday School for boys, while his wife, Ardu, taught lower grades. His previous church affiliations had not been important to him, he admitted to a small group of the Building Committee members. *"In order to have a well rounded personality, life must develop in three areas,"* he said. *"The*

physical, the mental and the spiritual. I discovered a short time back that I was making progress in only two areas. I am now trying to correct this."

1949

Harry Truman won over Thomas Dewey for the presidency.

The United Nations headquarters in New York was dedicated.

The national debt was \$250 billion. The national income was \$222 billion.

The discovery of cortisone was a medical event.

American book publishers noted an increasing popularity for nonfiction religious books.

The bulletin of Colonial Church reported its continuing growth. *"I know you will rejoice with the Deacons in the fact that \$34.07 was the amount of the loose offering last Sunday. The entire amount will go for ministerial relief."*

The Sunday School held its first Christmas pageant, entitled "How the Chimes Rang."

Virginia Circle made the first choir robes for the growing choir, now numbering 14.

The dedication of the new church was June 5. In five years the membership had grown to 309. There were 210 children enrolled in Sunday School.

Martha Circle was organized and Mrs. Phillip Bailey was the president of the Women's Federation. They pledged \$500.00 toward the Building Fund. The Federation meetings were held in the Grange Hall. Since there was no running water, it was supplied from the nearby farms of Fred and George Willson.

Another branch of activity came with the Colonial Nursery School which opened with 20 young pupils between the ages of two and a half and four years of age. Mrs. Oz (Alona) Black was its director. It was held three days a week and tuition was \$10.00 per month. Mrs. Homer (Margaret) Kinney was the assistant director. *"She is worth any two assistants I have ever had,"* said Mrs. Black, who was well known for her work with young children. The nursery school served the needs of the surrounding community and not only paid its way,

but at the end of the year was able to make a gift to the church.

Marie Dyregrov was the Women's Federation president for the year 1949 - 1950. Their first rummage sale netted \$194.03. Patience Circle came into existence this year.

Martha Circle made curtains for the church kitchen. One family donated chairs for the Sunday School. Things were taking shape. The men laid the asphalt tile on the main floor and the Minute Men helped in purchasing an organ.

An indication of the strong support the church was receiving was in an over subscribed budget of \$19,625.

1950

The population of the country was 150,697,361.

President Truman ordered the development of the hydrogen bomb.

CBS started broadcasting television in color.

On June 25, the North Korean troops invaded the Republic of South Korea by crossing the 38th parallel. The United States sent troops to fight in Korea.

Colonial Church celebrated its fourth birthday with a membership of 342. Prudence Circle came into being.

A need for a parish worker was resolved when Miss Maxine Mair was added to the staff.

1951

A general war was averted as the administration stood firmly behind the United Nations on the decision not to attack the

Chinese bases beyond the Yula River.

On April 11, General Douglas McArthur was relieved of his command by President Truman.

The first Senior Age Group met in February.

While in another part of the country Colonial's future minister was graduated from Harvard College, in Edina the decision was made to undertake another building drive. More school rooms were needed and a larger chapel. The goal was to raise \$35,000.

Membership of the church was 529.

The budget was \$27,431.

1952

Dwight David Eisenhower was elected President of the United States. Richard Nixon became Vice President.

The educational unit at Colonial Church was dedicated on October 5. Dr. Thomas Goodwin, Executive Secretary of the Minnesota Congregational Conference, was the speaker.

More improvements were made to the church in the resurfacing of the parking lot and the seeding and sodding of the lawn.

The budget of \$31,035 was met in an Every Member Canvas.

1953

Senator Joseph McCarthy charged that there were Soviet espionage activities in America, which became a "spy hunt."

A Peace Treaty was signed with North Korea. Casualties in this war were 137,051.

Joseph Stalin died.

Julius and Ethel Rosenberg received the death penalty for espionage.

In Edina, the Seims were given a well deserved vacation as a gift from their grateful parishoners. They chose Florida for a rest in the sun and returned home reenergized. The increased work load of the minister necessitated the help of an assistant. The Rev. Robert Skeeel was chosen as Associate Minister of the church, which once again was raising money to complete the third floor of the new church school unit.

The Women's Federation was adding more circles, which included Rebekah, Ruth, Abigail and Phoebe. Lunches for circle events were fifty cents.

At this time it was noted that Colonial Church was affiliated with the Greater Minneapolis Council of Churches, the Minnesota Council of Churches, the National Council and World Council of Churches.

The budget for 1953 was \$39,985.

1954

On March 1, five congressmen were shot on the floor of the House of Representatives by Puerto Rican nationalists.

At Colonial Church, the Minute Men contributed about \$10,000 to various building funds during the seven years they had been selling Christmas trees.

Membership of the church was 825.

1955

Dr. Jonas Salk discovered an anti-polio vaccine.

The ordination of women ministers by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian church opened up new opportunities for women.

Racial segregation in public schools was banned by the Supreme Court.

In Colonial Church, Mrs. Gale Sperry became Choir Director with Mrs. Verne Whitaker as organist. There were now three choirs to enrich the Sunday morning services: Chancel Choir, Pilgrim Choir and Junior Choir.

Once again it became necessary to enlarge on the church facilities. A new drive to raise \$200,000 was undertaken with George Posselt as chairman of the Building Plans Committee. Working with him were: Gale Kesler, Harper Glezen, Gerry Morse, John Hayhoe, Victor Fridlund, John Foley, Gordon Paske, Howard Lindow, Morton Johnson, Arthur Sehlin, Arthur Edwards, Jr., Paul Carson, Mrs. Richard Wyatt, Mrs. Arthur Sailer, Mrs. Theodore Nelson and Mrs. Leslie Rossiter. Ex-officio members were Kenneth Seim, Robert Skeele, Moderator Bobb Chaney and Chairman of the Board of Trustees, John Forney. Arthur Sehlin was General Chairman of the Building Fund Drive.

New tactics were used when a "Loyalty Dinner" was held at the Calhoun Beach Club. All adults, 13 and over, were urged to attend. The surprise was that the dinner was free. Three hundred members and

friends took this opportunity to see the well laid out plans for the new addition. There was no solicitation of pledges at this evening event. It was a successful drive, one which was oversubscribed at \$241,000.

The membership at this time was over 1,000.

The budget had grown to \$51,000.

1956

Blacks boycotted buses in Montgomery, Alabama.

On November 13, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation on buses and streetcars was unconstitutional.

On March 2, the General Conference of the Methodist Church in Minneapolis demanded abolishment of all racial segregation in Methodist churches.

Grace Kelly married Prince Rainier, III of Monaco.

President Eisenhower was renominated by a landslide.

In 1956, the community welcomed the innovative shopping center of Southdale on France Avenue.

The Tenth Anniversary of the church was celebrated with a banquet (\$1.75) at the Edina Morningside High School. There was a pageant which depicted the history of the church. Dr. Stanley North was the guest speaker at the Sunday services.

A ground breaking ceremony for the new sanctuary was held in the afternoon. Among the articles included in the cornerstone were pictures of the Wooddale Area Committee, the First Solicitation Committee, a church directory and the By-Laws.

Esther Circle joined the Women's Federation.

Members were asked to indicate their preference as to the merger of the Congregational Christian and Evangelical and Reformed churches. A resolution to uphold the merger was by a vote of 33 to 14. A complete resolution was sent to the entire mailing list of the church membership.

The Rev. Robert Skeele left to serve the First Congregational Church of Alexandria, Minnesota. The Rev. Donn Coddington was called as the new Assistant Minister.

The membership at this time was 1,046.

The budget was \$56,708. World Missions received ten percent of the budget: \$5,500.

1957

The Soviets launched the first earth satellite, Sputnik I.

The proposed "Eisenhower Doctrine" would protect against communist aggression of any middle eastern nation requesting aid.

The church's new sanctuary was ready for the Palm Sunday service. It could seat 500 people. The cost of the building was \$312,000, plus \$50,000 for the organ and furnishings. An additional amount of \$78,000 went for the architect's fee.

The Rev. Mr. Kenneth E. Seim became "Dr. Seim" on June 6, by receiving an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from the Chicago Theological Seminary.

1958

A serious recession affected the entire country.

Alaska was admitted to the United States as its 49th state.

On May 13, the church membership voted not to join the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. A committee was formed to study the merger with the Congregational and Evangelical and Reformed group.

1959

Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev visited the United States.

Hawaii became the 50th state of the Union.

President Eisenhower asked for \$40 billion for the defense budget.

The church sponsored an eight week European tour for the Seims who visited 11 countries.

The membership was 1,360.

The budget was \$100,450. Benevolent giving amounted to \$12,355.

1960

A United States U-2 reconnaissance plane was shot down over the U.S.S.R. on May 1.

John F. Kennedy won the election for President by defeating Richard M. Nixon in a close popular vote.

Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Seim resigned his ministry from Colonial Church after a period of 14 years. He accepted the position of Senior Minister at the First Congregational Church of Western Springs, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago.

For eight years, Dr. Seim was the chairman of the ministerial standing committee of the Twin Cities Association of Congregational Churches and Ministers. He was also a director of the Minnesota Congregational Conference and a past president of the Minneapolis Congregational Union.

On January 24, there was a testimonial dinner to honor the Seims. Dr. Seim delivered his last sermon on January 29, 14 years almost to the day when he first arrived in Edina.

"Roots go down a long way in 14 years," he said. "Colonial was born, grew through difficult years of adolescence and reached adult life during our ministry." He went on to say, "These have been wonderful years in Edina, but I was sent here to organize and build a church. That's done and now another man will be able to serve the congregation in a different way."

He noted that the membership had grown from 135 in 1946 to 1,650 in 1961. The building was valued at \$750,000 and was a property of which to be proud. He had performed 113 weddings and 820 baptisms and had made an important impact on the community of Edina.

The Rev. Donn M. Coddington served as Acting Minister during the interim period, until leaving to become minister of Olivet Congregational Church in St. Paul. On August 15, the Rev. Donald N. Lindgren was called as Interim Minister.

In April, a Refugee Resettlement Committee was formed to select and arrange for a refugee family to be sponsored by the church. They chose a Dutch family from Indonesia to come under their wing and care.

Thirty two young people in Pilgrim Fellowship made an eventful trip to Chicago. They sat up in the day coach of the train at night, both coming and going, and received high grades in conduct from their chaperones.

1961

The U.S. broke diplomatic relations with Cuba.

The Peace Corps project was initiated.

President Kennedy accepted responsibility for the aborted Bay of Pigs.

Ernest Hemingway died of a self-inflicted gun shot wound.

Colonial Church members took a final and decisive vote on the merger of the Evangelical and Reformed Churches. The vote was not to merge. This brought a moratorium to a much discussed issue which had troubled the church members for some time. It also added to the difficulty in finding a new minister who would fulfill the qualifications demanded by the Pastoral Search Committee. This was no small order.

Irv W. Kimmerle headed up a committee that reviewed the files of over 100 ministers from the east to the west coasts and which included vitae of the best ministers in the country. They shared with the membership the qualities they were looking for in the new minister:

"It has been the committee's aim to obtain a man who is outstanding in the pulpit and ranks high in counseling, youth leadership, religious education, program planning, administration and who has personal attributes to make him loved and respected by all. Along with this we have not overlooked the qualifications of his wife."

With a laundry list such as this, it is not difficult to understand that few made it to the final judgment.

One minister stood out from all the others. Arthur A. Rouner, Jr. had graduated from Harvard University in 1951, where he was captain of the freshmen rowing crew, among other activities. He also had attended Choate School in New Hampshire. The year of 1952 - 1953 was spent at New College, University of Edinburgh, Scotland. He had graduated from Union Theological Seminary

in New York in 1954. As a seminary student he was an assistant at the East Harlem Protestant Parish in New York City. This was an Italian neighborhood with some blacks and a few Puerto Ricans. "Lucky" Luciano, the notorious head of the Mafia, had grown up in the next block. It was the task of the young Mr. Rouner to call on the tenements in his block and invite them to church.

As a 33 year old minister, he had won a nationwide competition for the best book on Congregational history, *"The Congregational Way of Life."*

His first pastorate was the First Congregational Church of Williamsburg, Massachusetts, where he served from 1954 - 1959. He then became the minister of the Eliot Church of Newton, Massachusetts, where he was serving when he received his invitation to come to The Colonial Church of Edina.

1962

The national debt exceeded \$300 billion for the first time.

U.S. troops in Viet Nam "were not combat troops."

Rachel Carson wrote *"Silent Spring,"* a documentation in which she related how chemicals were upsetting the balance of nature.

Lt. Col. John Glenn orbited the earth three times.

Movie actress Marilyn Monroe died, an apparent suicide.

Premier Khrushchev agreed to halt construction of bases in Cuba.

Negro student, James Meredith, was enrolled at the University of Mississippi.

The Test Ban Treaty went into effect, banning testing in the atmosphere.

It was with a great amount of relief and pleasure that the *"Spire"* announced in May that:

"Our Pastoral Committee is happy to announce that it has arrived at a unanimous choice for minister of our church, Arthur A. Rouner, Jr., of Newton, Massachusetts."

Mr. Rouner's father, the Rev. Dr. Arthur Acy Rouner, Sr., was the minister of the Cadman Memorial Church of Brooklyn, New York. He described his son as a "great preacher, a fine pastor and very popular with young people."

Mrs. Rouner, the former Mary (Molly) Safford, was a graduate of Radcliffe College and also had been a student in Edinburgh, Scotland. The Rouners were married on August 26, 1950. They arrived in Edina on September 1 with their four children: John (7), Kristen (6), Tamsie (4) and Mary Elizabeth (2).

The new minister wrote in his first letter to the "Spire,"

"We have come to a land we are only beginning to know.... I think we have an exciting adventure before us."

The Rouner family moved into the new parsonage at 4526 Drexel Avenue.

1963

Astronaut Gordon Cooper orbited the earth 22 times.

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled that regulations requiring the recitation of the Lord's Prayer in public schools was unconstitutional.

President John F. Kennedy was fatally wounded by assassin Lee Harvey Oswald as he rode in a motorcade in Dallas.

The installation service for the new minister was held on January 9. Rev. Dr. Kenneth Seim came to give the charge to the new Senior Minister.

In his installation paper, entitled "*The Ministry For Me*," Mr. Rouner wrote: "*We did what my father always told us to do: resist the ministry until we couldn't stay out of it.... If you are right then you need never be ashamed to rise and stand for it. You could defy the world, my parents taught us, if you were right, and they made reformers of us at an early age. My parents made faith real for me.*"

That he was willing to stand up and be counted was evidenced in an article in the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*. The headline read, "*Minister Doesn't Avoid Touchy Subjects.*" It quoted Colonial's minister as saying, "*The nature of the Christian*

message is revolutionary. You can't preach it without offending someone... I'm really not a thumper on social issues. I would like to achieve some changes, but I'm willing to add a measure of patience to accomplish things." He went on to say, "*I'm trying to encourage recognition of the fact that all of us are highly privileged living in Edina.*" He strongly supported reaching out beyond those borders to the inner city of Minneapolis and supporting General Hospital and their welfare cases, even though it was a responsibility of the City of Minneapolis.

He didn't hesitate to face the social issues of the day. "*I don't harp on drinking, but I remind people that they may be setting a bad example to people who can't handle alcohol as well as they can, their own children for instance.*"

He said he wouldn't disavow "*the title of 'crusader,' but I don't want to be narrowed to a few issues.*"

The Rev. Mr. Arthur A. Rouner, Jr. received an Honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Piedmont College, Demorest, Georgia in May.

The first Easter Sunrise Service was held outdoors in Cornelia Park on April 14.

Allan Fisher and his wife Terry joined the staff in June as he became Assistant Minister and was ordained on May 24. Allan came from Yale Divinity School where he had been president of the senior class. They lived in the second parsonage at 6000 Kellogg Avenue.

A Block Dance was held for the whole neighborhood "just for fun" in the church parking lot. There was dancing under colored lights to a dance band as well as folk singing and square dancing.

A Mother Daughter Luncheon was held in May with the luncheon costing 75 cents.

A total of 170 new members were received.

The Colonial basketball team won the city Y.M.C.A. championship in April.

Dr. Rouner participated in the Walk For Mankind of 22 miles in an effort to raise money for Project Concern.

A rummage sale by all the circles netted \$2,000.

Eight families volunteered to take in a child from the inner city for nine days during the summer.

The church sponsored a Cuban family as an extension of the mission of the church.

1964

Bodies of three civil rights workers were found near Philadelphia, Mississippi.

The Nobel Peace Prize went to Martin Luther King, Jr.

Lyndon Baines Johnson was elected President of the United States. Hubert H. Humphrey was his Vice President.

"Hello Dolly" and "Fiddler on the Roof" were big hits on Broadway.

A new baby for the parsonage: Arthur Andrew Rouner was born to Arthur and Molly on January 9.

Allan Fisher left Colonial for a ministry in Grand Marais, Minnesota.

The adjacent property at 4516 West 56th Street was purchased.

The budget was \$136,516.

1965

Malcolm X, founder of the Black Nationalist Movement, was killed.

Marchers numbering 3,200, led by Dr. King, marched from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama.

U.S. Marines, 3,500 in number, landed in South Viet Nam, the first combat troops to enter the country. By May 7, the total U.S. forces amounted to 42,200.

Major Edward White took the first space walk 135 miles above the earth.

In May, many members of the Senior Pilgrim Fellowship spent long hours working on the dikes in the flood ravaged communities surrounding the Twin Cities, particularly for the elderly and cardiac homeowners.

Colonial Church participated in a nine week drive for clothing, food and books for black communities in the south.

On August 26, David L. Williamson and his wife, Anne, joined the staff as Youth Director. David was a graduate of the University of Minnesota, Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, and a three year staff member of Young Life.

Robert Dobbin became the first Administrator.

Pioneered by the Pilgrim Fellowship, the Edina Teen Center opened at the Edina Morningside High School gymnasium. Five hundred young people attended opening night.

Forty members of the Senior P.F. went to Washington, D.C. for a spring vacation trip. A dozen P.F.ers went to the Minneapolis Workhouse and led a worship service there.

Colonial Church established an inner city nursery at Fifth Avenue Congregational Church.

The first handbell choir made its appearance at the Easter service.

Dr. Rouner's book, "Master of Men," was published. It was compared to the sermons of the beloved Peter Marshall.

Colonial's minister was also the Governor of the Congregational Historical Society, a member of the Publications Commission of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches, a member of the Boston Author's Club and a member of Edina Rotary.

There were 1,800 members at this time.

The budget was \$152,500.

1966

Ten thousand people picketed the White House to protest the war.

Michael DeBakey and team installed the first successful artificial heart pump in a patient.

Ronald Reagan was elected governor of California on the Republican ticket.

At Colonial Church, the number of choirs had increased to Cherub Choir, Crusader Choir, Pilgrim Choir and Chancel Choir.

The Senior P.F. went on a week long canoe trip to the Quetico Superior Wilderness with Arthur Rouner and David Williamson leading.

Sixteen of Colonial's young men were in the Armed Services.

There were 86 in the Confirmation Class.

The Junior Pilgrim Fellowship went to the Wisconsin Dells by train. Cost of the trip: \$7.50.

Colonial gave \$1,000 to a new Congregational church in Alaska and sponsored two boys to help in the building of it.

In a news article called "My Occupation," Dr. Rouner wrote: *"It's a tough life. If you're a good minister, and speak the truth in your sermons and try to live the truth in your life, not everyone will like you. You'll be criticized. You'll work hard. An 80 hour week is nothing for most ministers. You'll be weary a good part of the time.... But you have wonderful friendships.... Christian friendships, which are the best kind.... How do you know you're right for the ministry? You should love God and love people. You should enjoy history, literature and social studies.... You may be scared to preach a sermon or deal with people's problems, but that and all the rest you can leave up to God."*

Dr. Seim returned to the pulpit as guest minister for the first Lenten service in March.

The 20th Anniversary of Colonial Church was celebrated. Dr. Rouner's sermon was, "No Time Like This."

Charter member Leslie Rossiter died.

1967

Three astronauts were killed when fire broke out in their Apollo I capsule.

Protestors numbering 400,000 marched in New York City against the war in Viet Nam.

It was a summer of race riots in the big cities.

Thurgood Marshall became the first black to be appointed to the Supreme Court.

The Rev. Mr. Maurice A. Fetty was added to the staff as Colonial's first Teaching Minister. A native of Wisconsin, he came to Colonial from the LaHeramosa Christian Church in New York City.

A Colonial Residence for Girls was dedicated.

Dr. Rouner visited nine of Colonial's college and preparatory school students who were attending schools in Iowa, Wisconsin, Illinois and New England, as part of the church's plan to keep in touch with its youth wherever they were. He was the guest speaker at his first church in Williamsburg, Massachusetts.

Colonial Church, through the Benevolence Board, helped support the work of Dr. Jim Turpin of Project Concern, an independent, non-government relief program in the Far East.

The church sponsored seven young people in a summer mission program in Mexico City.

Dr. Rouner and three other local ministers went to Washington to gather information regarding the United States policy in Viet Nam. On his return he told the congregation that the U.S. must find a middle ground between victory and defeat in Viet Nam and *"many need to be prepared to risk something. God cannot bless forever this thing we are doing."*

The church collected Betty Crocker coupons to provide a station wagon for the Migrant Ministry. Over 500,000 coupons were collected.

Charter member Morton J. Johnson died.

Membership was 2,080. The annual budget was \$180,000. It fell \$10,000 short of its goal. Benevolence was \$40,000.

1968

A U.S. Navy intelligence ship, the Pueblo, was captured by the North Koreans.

Army nerve gas in Utah killed 6,400 sheep.

President Lyndon Johnson announced he would not run for re-election.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated at the age of 39.

Robert Kennedy died of gunshot wounds from the gun of Sirhan Sirhan. He was 42.

Richard Nixon defeated Hubert H. Humphrey for the presidency.

Jacqueline Kennedy married Aristotle Onassis.

Dr. Rouner was asked to speak to an assembly of students at Edina High School the morning following Dr. King's death.

A Colonial Prayer Chain was formed, meeting in homes.

In February, Dr. Rouner entered the hospital for back surgery for a slipped disc. He was granted a two week sick leave following his hospital stay, which he and Molly enjoyed in Florida.

His third book was published, *"THE FREE CHURCH TODAY: New Life for the Whole Church."* "If we really want all Christians to be united in one organic whole, we are going to have to give up creedal agreement," he said.

Dr. Rouner visited about 25 Colonial collegians on Iowa campuses.

Dial-A-Meditation began as a special service. The telephone message was an ecumenical adventure done cooperatively by several Edina churches to area residents.

Colonial Church sponsored a one minute spot radio program on station WPBC called "Contact." The cost per minute was \$16.50.

A dramatic new approach in youth ministry developed with the first Senior P.F. spring ski vacation trip to Colorado.

Margaret Kinney retired after 20 years of faithful and loving service to the church, with 200 people honoring her at a dinner at the church.

Colonial was one of the first churches to join the National Association of Church Business Administrators.

The amount of \$10,000 was pledged to Project Concern, International for help in building a medical center at DaMpao.

Dr. Rouner met with 12 luncheon groups for men downtown on a regular basis. He averaged 1,200 pastoral calls a year.

Colonial helped to sponsor the Sabathani Community Center as one of its local missions to the black community in the city.

The confirmation class had 76 ninth graders.

Charter members Beech Wheeler and Blanche Trafzer died.

The church membership was 2,046.

The budget was \$217,000. Benevolence was \$70,000.

1969

The first totally artificial heart was implanted in a human. The patient died.

U.S. combat deaths in Viet Nam since 1961 were 33,641.

Dwight Eisenhower died.

Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landed on the moon.

Senator Edward Kennedy was involved in the Chappaquiddick tragedy.

Colonial Church and Our Lady of Grace Catholic Church sponsored its first combined Daily Vacation Bible School.

The women of the church started a building fund for the Sabathani Baptist Church recreational center.

Thirty P.F.ers went on a canoe trip to the B.W.C.A. with Arthur Rouner and David Williamson.

After funding ran out, the radio "Contact" program terminated after reaching an estimated 1,400,000.

Colonial Firesides began, meetings of neighbors and friends of Colonial in homes.

The Benevolence Board donated \$1,000 for refurbishing a storefront as a Malcolm X Drop In Center.

Charter member Frances Anderson died.

There were three worship services every Sunday.

Average attendance from January through May was 856.

There were 450 students in the Church School.

Two hundred men were involved in the men's luncheon discussion groups.

There were 60 people who attended the Neighborhood Fireside monthly gatherings.

Robert Dobbin resigned as Administrator to go to Hope Presbyterian Church in St. Paul. Paul Nygren became the new Administrator.

A telephone Prayer Chain was formed with 40 people available to offer intercessory prayer daily.

It was noted that Colonial Church had sent only one of its young people into the pastoral ministry in its 23 year history.

There were 66 high school students who spent a week in Colorado.

The revised budget was \$270,388. Benevolence was \$67,600.

1970

In an anti war demonstration, four students were killed and nine wounded at Kent State University in Ohio by National

Guardsmen firing into the crowd.

Daniel and Phillip Berrigan, Catholic priests, were captured after being convicted of burning draft records.

Colonial Church *"has admonished its young men it will stand by them whether they choose military service or as conscientious objectors to war."*

The premiere performance of organist Charles Forsberg's work, *"Benedictus,"* written especially for Colonial, was performed by the choir.

Arthur Rouner and Maurice Fetty made a big hit with their *"Devilish Dialogues"* on John Gallos' Sunday Morning Show on WCCO TV. They were asked to appear four times.

A new book, *"Someone's Praying, Lord,"* by Dr. Rouner was published.

Dr. Seim was guest speaker on August 2.

Fifty six ninth graders were confirmed.

A special Harvest Fund for missions netted \$1,230.

Membership was 2,270.

1971

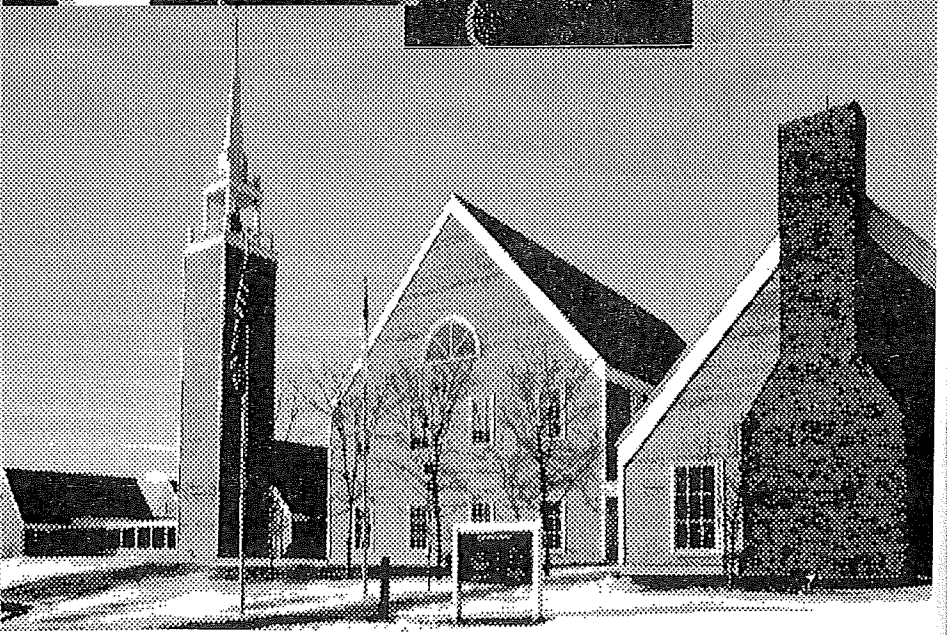
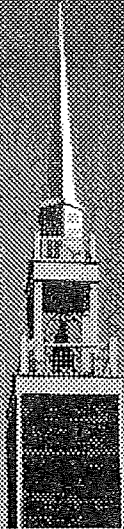
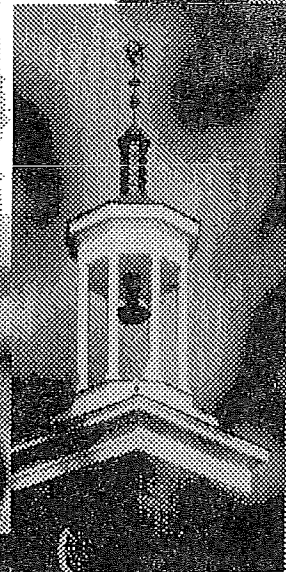
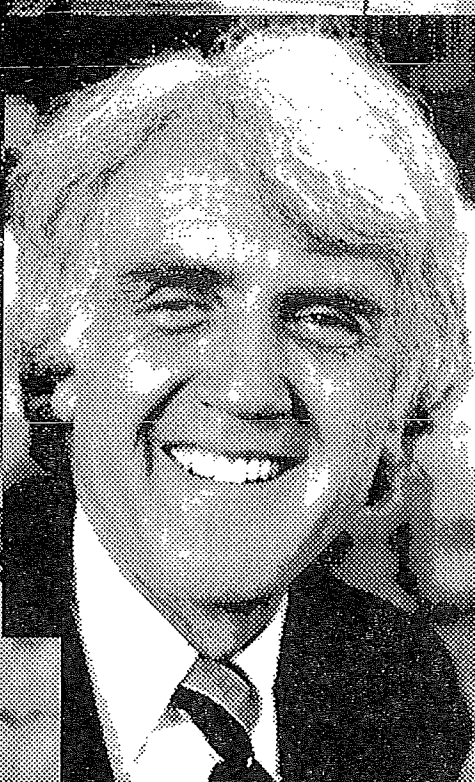
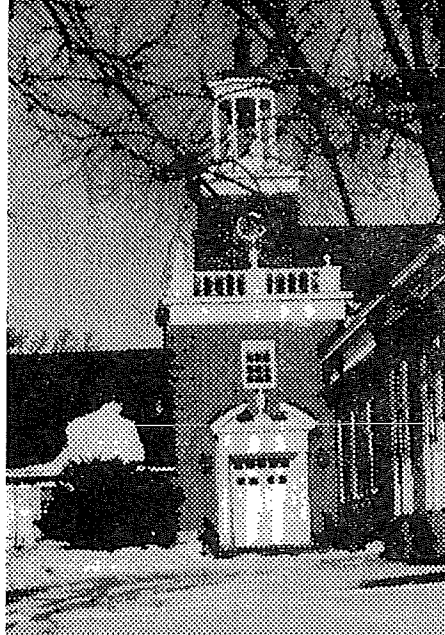
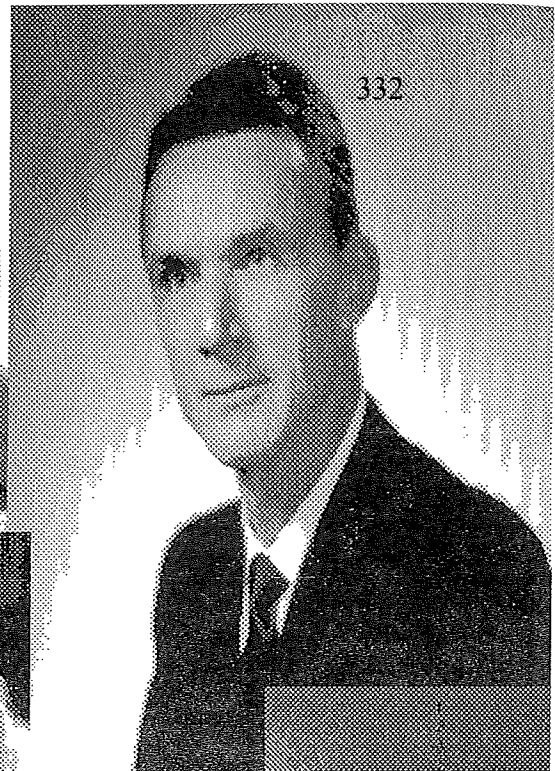
The 20 year embargo on trade with China came to an end under President Nixon.

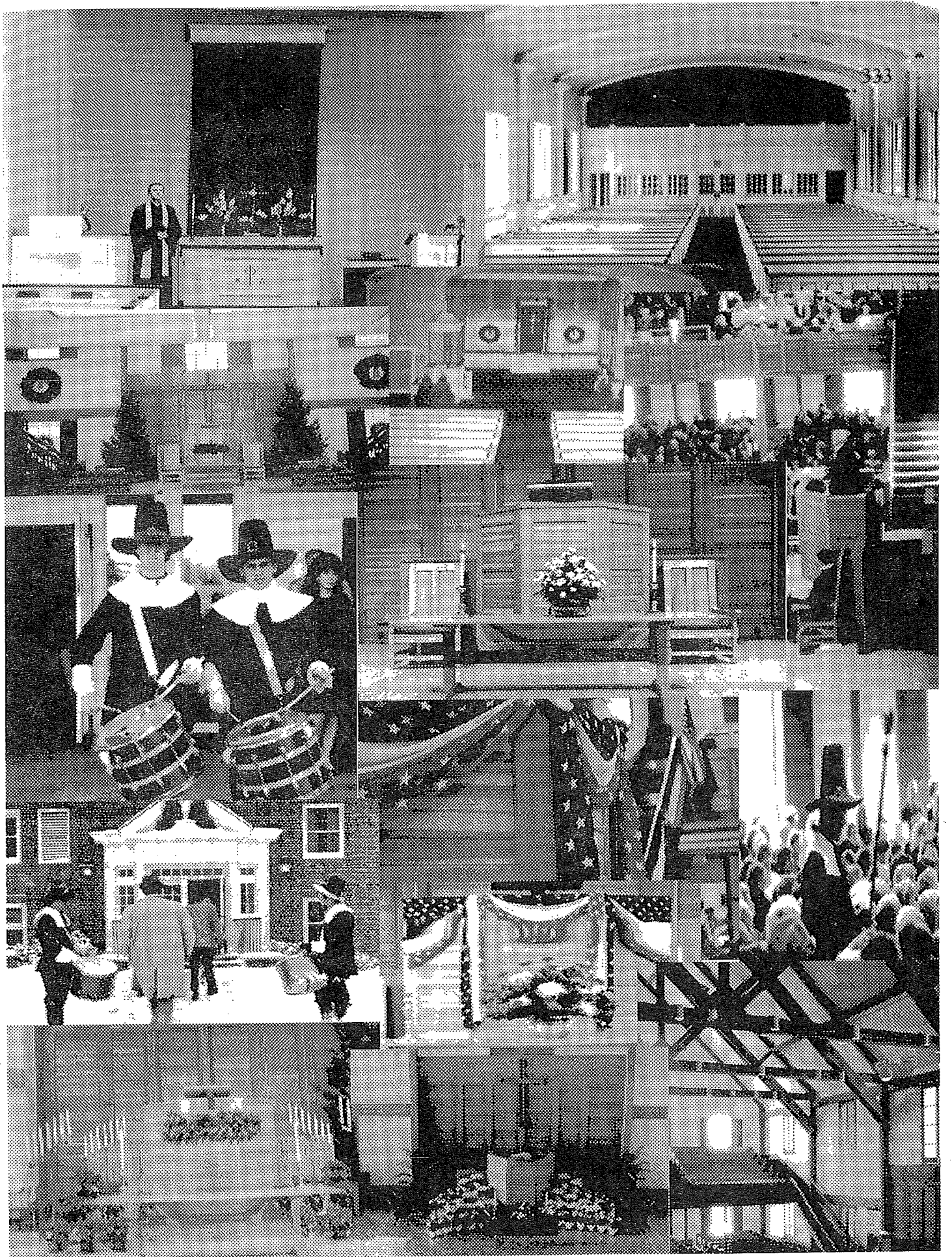
The Attica prison riot in Attica, New York took place with a loss of 43 lives.

The church contributed \$5,000 toward the Sabathani Baptist Church building fund.

Colonial was the first suburban church to have a black minister as a guest in the pulpit for the summer months. (Dr. Rouner and the Rev. Ronald Terry of Sabathani Baptist Church in Minneapolis had exchanged pulpits in 1967 and 1968.)

Red Star Yeast sponsored Dr. Rouner on KTCR radio on "Mid-Day Contact."





The church hired an architectural firm to assess the needs of the church and to propose solutions.

The first Lake Baptism at Thomas Beach at Lake Calhoun was held for those who wished to be baptized by immersion.

Dr. Seim and Donn Coddington were special guests at the 25th Anniversary celebration of the church.

An all day Prayer Vigil was held on the Viet Nam War Moratorium Day. (Colonial initiated Edina's first Viet Nam Forum in 1965.)

Sixty four young people were confirmed.

David Williamson enrolled in a one year graduate program in addition to his full-time work at the church.

Arthur Rouner earned \$900 in support through his Walk For Mankind for Project Concern.

Pledge goal was topped and erased the 1970 deficit.

The budget was \$264,272.

1972

President Nixon visited China, ending 22 years of hostility.

To prevent hijacking, screening of passengers and their luggage became mandatory on all domestic and foreign flights.

J. Edgar Hoover, F.B.I. chief, died at the age of 77.

Governor George Wallace was shot while campaigning, paralyzing him from the waist down.

President Nixon became the first U.S. President to visit Moscow.

Five men were caught burglarizing the democratic office in the Watergate building in Washington, D.C.

After five years at Colonial, Maurice Fetty left to become the Senior Minister of the Mayflower Congregational Church of Grand Rapids, Michigan.

In recognition of his tenth year as minister, the congregation gave Dr. Rouner a gift of \$3,547. He was granted an extra eight weeks as a Sabbatical.

The Benevolence Board gave Alpha House, a

halfway house for parolees, \$2,500. Dr. Rouner served on its Board of Directors.

A Junior High Conversation Center was formed, which allowed young people to come in and talk about their frustrations.

There were 46 young people confirmed.

Virgil Leih became the new Minister of Outreach.

The Benevolence Board voted \$1,000 to the Upper Midwest Indian Center. It gave \$1,000 to programs for suburban delinquents involved with drugs, \$500 to Bethune School for underprivileged elementary school children, \$500 to the Neighborhood Involvement Program, \$500 to the Marie Sandvig Gospel Mission, \$1,000 to the Southdale Y.M.C.A. Drop-In Center for drug counseling, substantial financial support for the Wycliffe Bible Translators, support for five Campus Crusade workers in Europe and America, helped with support for a Presbyterian minister in Africa, a Christian University in Japan, a medical clinic in Hong Kong, two hospitals in Viet Nam, a clinic in Tijuana, Mexico, a clinic on a Navajo Reservation in New Mexico and a dental van in Appalachia for Project Concern.

The membership of the church was 2,270.

The budget was \$294,676.

It was the year of the energy crisis and thermostats were turned down.

1973

Lyndon B. Johnson died in San Antonio at the age of 64.

The Watergate trials dominated the headlines.

President Nixon was reelected with Gerald Ford as his Vice President.

Five young men from Colonial entered seminary to begin studies in theology: Eric Anderson, Steve Richardson and David Rupp. Warren Mullen was studying at the Pacific School of Religion and Stephen Brachlow was doing graduate work in theology in Zurich.

Dr. Robert A. Guelich was called to fill the position of Teaching Minister. He came from Bethel

Seminary in St. Paul after spending four months teaching in Aberdeen, Scotland.

David Williamson was ordained and became the new Minister of Pastoral Counseling and Young Adults. While he was Youth Director, the numbers of young people attending Pilgrim Fellowship increased by 300%.

Mark Wickstrom became the new Youth Director.

Patricia Sandberg was the new Director of Christian Education.

The amount of \$1,000 was sent to Central Africa to help with the famine. The Thanksgiving offering of \$5,389 was also sent.

The church collected money for "Wheels For Darrell" to buy an electric wheelchair for a crippled young man who was left an orphan.

Pilgrim House was established next door to the church as a counseling office for David Williamson and a youth center for Mark Wickstrom.

In the Walk For Mankind, Colonial had the most support of any single organization. The amount of \$5,905 was raised by 150 people.

Dr. Rouner's book, "Marryin Sam Speaks Out" was featured on the Boone and Erickson show on WCCO radio.

Fifty eight young people were confirmed.

Twenty seven young people between 15-22 worked on summer mission projects.

Gary Downing was ordained.

It was noted that The Colonial Church of Edina was one of the five largest churches in the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches.

Colonial was the fourth or fifth highest of all the churches of either the United Church of Christ or the N.A.C.C.C. in terms of active membership as shown by the Sunday worship.

There was a Prayer Vigil For Peace in December.

Junior high kids gathered in the Great Hall Friday nights for "Fun Nights."

The church had 2,400 members.

The budget was \$397,765. Missions were \$85,000.

1974

The Watergate trials revealed President Nixon's involvement in the cover-up and break-in. Under threats of impeachment, he resigned. Vice President Ford was sworn in as President with Nelson Rockefeller as Vice President. President Ford pardoned Richard Nixon.

Under a proclamation, thousands of deserters and draft evaders became eligible for clemency.

Colonial Church joined forces with other churches for Meals On Wheels.

After 21 years of imprisonment in China, Jack Downey, roommate of Arthur Rouner's at Choate School, was freed. For eleven years the church had been praying for him.

The Benevolence board allocated \$2,500 to support Alpha House for parolees.

Dr. Rouner's new book, "How to Love," was published.

At a Church Meeting, it was voted to acquire a six months' option to purchase a 23 acre site at the intersection of Tracy Avenue and Highway 62 Crosstown. A new Task Force, the Colonial Guard, was to study the possibilities of a new building.

Sixty two young people were confirmed.

Dr. Robert Guelich was ordained at the First Baptist Church in White Bear Lake on June 14.

A capital fund drive for a new church was to begin immediately.

A Colonial Action Committee was formed. Members were: Gene Purdy, chairman; Jerry Potter, vice chairman; Doug Jones, Eunice Champlin, Bill Metcalfe, Gerry Morse, George Hite, David Griswold, George Champlin, Ginny MacLaury, Darrell Runke and Tom Ryter. They were to look into all aspects of the church's future plans.

The two bell choirs under the direction of Cammy Carteng performed in many places.

Candace Moffitt was the new children's choir director.

In October, a Church Meeting was held in Edina West High School to look at alternative programs for Colonial Church. It was voted 295 to 129 that the new building would be at Tracy Avenue.

A Thanksgiving offering of \$4,965 went to African hunger.

Charter member Mary Emma Willson died.

The budget was \$348,000.

1975

Teamster's President James R. Hoffa was reported missing.

Patricia Hearst was kidnapped in San Francisco.

Twelve seminarians from Colonial were in study for the ministry.

A \$2 million capital funds campaign started immediately for a new church. It was agreed that no construction would start until that sum had been pledged. A professional fund raiser, the Rev. T. Marshall Thompson of Ketchum, Inc., came to lead the drive for four months. Mavis Packard was chairman of coordinating all the non-soliciting work of the campaign. Committee members were: Eunice Champlin, Jan Felker, Marge Getsch, Mary Giger, Joyce Maul, Grace Nyrop and Pat Salovich. The Tracy property was bought for \$50,000 down payment and a contract for deed.

Fund raising chairmen for the new church drive were: Gene Purdy, Mavis Packard, Dorothy Boyer, Gerry Morse and Bruce MacLaury.

Two of Colonial's mission outposts in South Viet Nam were wiped out by the communists.

Twenty two Colonial artists exhibited in the Second Annual Palm Festival of the Arts.

In anticipation of the upcoming Bicentennial, Colonial held on Patriot's day, April 19, a "Not-So-Midnight-Ride of Paul Revere." He was joined on the historic reenactment ride by Samuel Prescott and William Dawes. Following the ride a "Freedom Meeting" was held in the church featuring music by the Edina East Concert Band and speeches by John

Hancock, Samuel Adams and John Adams. A "Boston Tea Party" reception was held following in the Great Hall.

Treasurer of the Building Fund Campaign, James K. Johnson, announced that the drive had exceeded one million dollars by May 6.

In 1975, 12 young people, under the leadership of Mark Wickstrom, spent two weeks in Mississippi as helpers to a doctor working with poor plantation workers.

Three young people spent ten weeks in Brazil: Diane Haugen, Kristen Rouner and Mark Polsfus. They helped in one of the Wycliffe Bible Translators mission stations in a remote area.

Charter member Lud Dyregrov died.

The budget was \$464,690. Benevolence was \$114,930.

1976

Howard Hughes died a recluse at the age of 72.

Barbara Walters became the highest paid journalist ever. She received a five year contract at \$1 million a year.

It was the year of the Bicentennial Celebration.

Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale won the bid for the presidency and vice presidency.

After three years as Teaching Minister, Bob Guelich resigned to return to Bethel Theological Seminary in St. Paul.

Following the now traditional Independence Day worship services, a Bicentennial Picnic for all was held at Countryside Park.

After seven years as Administrator, Paul Nygren resigned to go to United Theological Seminary in New Brighton as Business Administrator.

A memorial service was held for the Rev. Dr. Kenneth E. Seim, who died November 7 in Sun City, Arizona.

A Committee of Fifteen spearheaded the campaign for the fund raising for the new church. At this time, they were \$500,000 short of the \$2 million needed to start.

The budget was \$504,225.

1977

Aid to families with dependent children became the responsibility of the Social Security Administration.

Two thirds of the \$3.2 billion in military aid went to the Middle East.

The United Nations Security Council ordered an embargo because of the South African racial problems.

The plans for the new Colonial would include a Meetinghouse seating 1,000. There would be parking for over 350 cars.

Virgil Leih resigned after seven years to go into private business.

Jerry Potter worked regularly with prisoners at the Sandstone Federal Prison.

The Rev. Robert S. MacLennan was called to be the Teaching Minister. He was the pastor of the American Church in Bonn, Germany, a native of California, 35 years old. He and his wife, Jane, had two children.

Mr. William A. Venell was hired to replace Paul Nygren as Administrator.

Colonial provided \$130,000 a year to help people in the inner city of Minneapolis, in the slums of Mexico, in Appalachia, in Viet Nam, Brazil and Africa.

Charter member John Windhorst died.

Dr. Rouner proposed that Colonial Church consider becoming a member of both the United Church of Christ and the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches. In his pastoral letter he wrote: *"In the late 1950s the United Church of Christ was formed out of a merger of the Evangelical and Reformed Churches and the great majority of the Congregational Churches. At the time, perhaps a thousand Congregational*

churches elected to remain as independent congregations, continuing to bear the Congregational name. Colonial Church, voting in 1960, was one of those choosing to remain simply a Congregational church. However, Colonial has maintained her membership in both the State Conference and the local Association, both of which, in the meantime, became members of the United Church of Christ. Colonial also joined the Minnesota Fellowship of Congregationalists, which gives us a concrete relationship with both 'houses' of American Congregationalism through their local organization."

Linda Kondracki from Bethel Seminary became the Director of Children's Ministry.

Director of Music, Henry Charles Smith, III resigned and was replaced by David Thomas.

Ground breaking for the new Colonial took place on May 1. Plans for the church itself were taken from the 18th century form of New England Meetinghouse. Others who participated in turning the earth with the "golden shovel" were David Griswold, Tom Carrier, Gene Purdy and Chuck Geer.

During the year, Dr. Rouner visited 90 collegians on campuses from Duluth to Dartmouth. He counseled 75 ninth grade confirmation candidates, performed 28 weddings, 55 baptisms and 12 funerals. He made over 2,000 personal visits to homes and businesses and led a father/son canoe trip. He was Pastor-in-Resident at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena for four weeks as part of his Sabbatical, and was one of the delegation who was asked to the White House for briefings on the Panama Canal Treaty.

The budget was \$542,846.

1978

The ceiling on the public debt was \$754 billion.

The Camp David accord resulted from 12 days of talks between Israel's Premier Begin, Egypt's Anwar Sadat and President Jimmy Carter.

The Panama Canal Treaty was passed.

The Rev. Gary W. Downing was commissioned to be "Minister At Large" on February 26.

Mrs. Joan Metcalfe joined the staff on May 30 as Lay Assistant to the Ministers in Pastoral Care.

The Rev. Robert Thatcher was called to be Minister of Pastoral Care and Missions.

A new book by Dr. Rouner was published, "Healing Your Hurts."

It was estimated that the new church would cost \$2.5 million, exclusive of many interior needs. The steeple would cost \$60,000 and was not included in this estimate. There was a 25 year mortgage at 9% taken on it.

Ron Leafblad and Jo Findell were asked to co-chair the completion of the Building Fund Campaign.

Forty nine young people were confirmed.

Andy Overman, who had been active in the youth ministry, entered Bethel Seminary and joined the Colonial Staff as a Seminary Assistant in Outreach.

The budget was \$594,739.

1979

Fifty two hostages were seized in Teheran on November 4 at the U.S. Embassy.

President Carter designated January 15 a national holiday in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr.

An accident caused the release of radiation from the nuclear plant at Three Mile Island.

In his pastoral letter on February 2, Dr. Rouner wrote, "Well, we made it! What fun to be part of a company of a thousand streaming across town to our promised land! We had guessed hopefully

maybe a couple of hundred would walk and that we might serve 300 for lunch. With 1,000 walkers looking literally like the children of Israel on the march, and another 300 waiting for us on the other side, it was a wonderfully overwhelming time.... Good and bright words from the Hawthornes and Kinneys, a lovely reflection on "The Meaning of the Moment" from Chuck Geer, the Plymouth Rock placed by him and Moderator Ray Beachy, a loving prayer of the people from Anne Carrier...heady time. Beautiful time. Glad time...."

The first service in the new Colonial Church was held on January 21. Dedication week was February 18 - 25. Dr. George William Webber, President of the New York Theological Seminary, was the preacher. Architect Richard Hammel spoke, as did Chuck Geer, chairman of the Building Committee. Over 1,500 adults and 140 young children attended the worship services.

The dedication recital of the new pipe organ was played by Professor Kindall of St. Olaf College Music Department.

The Nguyen family from Viet Nam was sponsored by the church.

Sixty five ninth graders were confirmed.

Maxine Sanders retired, after years of feeding and serving Colonial members.

Many young people from Colonial were studying for the ministry: Lanny Kuester, Andy Overman, Patti Dando, Steve Dando, Dale Wallin, Arnie Leslie, Drick Boyd, Don Lewis, Darlene Stensby, Tom Zerse, Chris Cozad, John Anderson, Gary Hanson, Mark Magnuson, Eric Anderson and Kathryn Berg.

Colonial pledged \$10,000 to Project Concern for help in building the medical center at DaMpaao.

The church took on the responsibility of four more refugee families.

On May 25, Dr. Rouner wrote in his pastoral letter: "My goal is 20 more years in the ministry. If I could remain viable and vital, I would like them to be in Edina, Minnesota at Colonial Church. Not because I think there is nothing else to do, or that I couldn't do something else, but because I believe Colonial more and more will be, in the

next 20 years ahead, a world church. I believe we will become both more intimate and more international. I believe we will become more service oriented and more spiritual. I think we will become more academic and more socially active.... These will be the years in which many of the things we have been working on for the last two decades and longer, will come to fruition. It will also be a great time to be in Edina, because many of the things that have been building in this community that are good and humane and compassionate and offer possibilities for leadership in the nation will come to fruition. I think we should all hang in there and go for it! It is going to be an exciting track ahead."

On Thanksgiving Day \$9,000 was collected for World Relief Hunger.

The budget was \$802,000.

1980

Ronald Reagan became the 40th President of the United States. George Bush was his Vice President. President Reagan proposed a budget of \$695 billion. He was wounded by John Hinckley, Jr., who shot him as he was about to enter his car. He was in the hospital 12 days.

The census for the country was 226,504,825.

Thirty two southeast Asians have been sponsored by Colonial Church.

World Vision received \$9,000 from Colonial for refugee and hunger work, and \$6,500 went to the InterVarsity Campus ministry.

Sixty five ninth graders were confirmed.

The Agape Service was established.

Sixty people attended the newly formed Sunday Night Singles Group.

Fifteen people were studying for the ministry.

Darlene Stensby was called as Minister to Children and Families.

Colonial Church's building design won the American Institute of Architects' highest award. Two pictures

of the Colonial village were in the July 14 issue of *U.S. News and World Report*.

The steeple was put atop the bell tower.

The Benevolence budget, plus supplemental gifts, amounted to \$50,532.

1981

One hundred and ten died in the collapse of a hotel walkway in the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Kansas City on July 18.

After twenty years of research, doctors approved an artificial heart for humans.

In January, the 52 hostages were released only minutes after President Reagan was sworn into office.

Pope John II was wounded by a Turkish gunman.

Anwar Sadat was assassinated by Islamic fundamentalists.

In the *Mpls/St. Paul* magazine, Arthur Rouner was included in an article entitled, "*Ten Most Influential Clergy in the Twin Cities:*"

Mark Wickstrom was ordained.

Andy Overman was called to be Minister At Large.

Seventy five young people were confirmed.

The Rev. Dr. Arthur A. Rouner, Sr. died unexpectedly on July 21. "*DO NOT GO GENTLE: A Sermon For My Father*" was preached by Dr. Rouner, Jr. on his return home.

Eighteen young people from Colonial were studying for the ministry.

For the second year, a Christmas Skating Party was held on the Pond. Fifty attended, sang carols around a bonfire and enjoyed cocoa and cookies.

Attendance on Christmas Sunday was 1,800.

The budget was \$1,028,462, with \$252,000 going to missions.

1982

Crowds jammed Manhattan in an anti nuclear protest.

The House of Representatives rejected the nuclear freeze.

Sandra Day O'Connor became the first woman Supreme Court Justice.

Colonial Church was asked by World Vision to help raise \$250,000 for food and medical supplies for 76,000 starving refugees in Africa. As a first installment, \$16,500 from the Thanksgiving offering was sent to World Vision.

Representatives from five local churches went to Nairobi to assess its needs. Those from Colonial were: Jim Peterson, Nan Edlund, Joan Miller, Greg Snell and Arthur Rouser. Over \$300,000 was raised by the five churches on Easter.

Andy Overman was ordained on January 31.

Two books were published: "Group Power," by David Williamson, and "Receiving the Spirit at Old First Church" by Arthur Rouser.

Colonial voted to join the United Church of Christ and the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches.

Dr. Rouser wrote in the Crier: "After terrible pain 25 years ago in our agony over the future of Congregationalism and the consequent pain in our own life as a fellowship, we elected to take a stance of shared faith and mission with both streams of American Congregationalism by joining BOTH the U.C.C. and the N.A.C.C.C. We mean to share some of our mission work with them, though much of what we have built up over 20 years of independent outreach will continue."

Seventy one young people were confirmed.

A big surprise party was held for Dr. Rouser to celebrate his 20 years at Colonial.

Kristen Rouser was called by Zion United Church of Christ in North Canton, Ohio as Associate Pastor.

Four out of eleven of the permanent ³⁴⁰ministry staff are women. Six are lay people and five are ordained clergy.

The budget was \$1,189,385.

1983

Sally Ride became the first female astronaut.

Two women were named to the cabinet: Elizabeth Dole and Margaret Heckler.

Dr. Barney Clark became the first human to have an artificial heart. He lived for 112 days.

The space shuttle, Challenger, was launched for the first time.

The Soviets shot down a South Korean airliner, killing 269, and 231 marines were killed in Beirut by a car bomb.

Teaching Minister Bob MacLennan accepted a call to become Senior Minister of the Hitchcock Presbyterian Church of Scarsdale, New York.

Darlene Stensby was ordained.

The amount of \$100,000 was raised for Ethiopian relief, and \$34,940 was raised for hunger in Minnesota.

Sixty four young people were confirmed.

Lois Collings, secretary to both Dr. Seim and Dr. Rouser, was honored at a luncheon in recognition of her 25 years of service to Colonial Church.

Arthur and Molly Rouser went to Nairobi on his Sabbatical.

The Rev. Dr. Gary W. Downing was called to be Executive Minister. He was a Young Life leader, Director of Youth Leadership and teacher in three seminaries, as well as being a Bush Foundation scholar.

Mark Wickstrom accepted a call to be Director of Youth Leadership, Inc. in Minneapolis and resigned from Colonial as Youth Director. He noted that over 2,000 teens had gone to Colorado with P.F., that 25 mission trips took Edina teenagers to far corners of the city, country, hemisphere, and that

Colonial had provided a Minister to Youth for 19 years, long before it was popular.

Colonial sent Wayne Brock and Andy Overman to Central America for ten days to assess its problems.

Africa Team II went to Ethiopia. Members of the team were Mark Heffelfinger, Babby Schwarz, Hakon Torjesen, Sue Lincoln and Arthur Rouser.

A book, "Opening Doors to the Job Market," by Rodney E. Stalley, David Williamson and James Sheard was published.

Charter member Jane Hawthorne died.

The budget was \$1,300,000.

1984

Soviet Premier Andropov died and was succeeded by an ailing Chernenko.

Geraldine Ferraro ran on the Democratic ticket for Vice President. She and Walter Mondale were defeated by Ronald Reagan and George Bush.

The Olympics were held in Los Angeles. Fourteen Soviet block nations did not participate. The United States won 83 gold medals.

Twenty three were dead as a result of a car bomb at the U.S. Embassy in Lebanon.

Jeff Lindsay was called to be Youth Director. He had been at the First Presbyterian Church of St. Paul as their Youth Director.

The Rev. K. David Hargrove was hired as the new Minister of Music. Two independent choirs were created to sing at both services.

Colonial sponsored a Hmong family, the Vangs.

Colonial lost one of its best friends, Dr. William A. Metcalfe, husband of Joan.

William Venell resigned as Administrator to take an early retirement. Skip Goodmanson was hired to replace him.

Under the guidance of the Counseling Minister, 1,500 counselling sessions were held.

In two years, Colonial raised \$80,000 for local hunger.

The Thanksgiving offering of \$30,000 went to Ethiopia.

The Rev. Dr. Robert A. Guelich was called to be Teaching Minister. He had served as Colonial's second Teaching Minister from 1973 to 1975. He was professor at the Northern Baptist Seminary in Chicago. He received several awards for his teaching and was author of three books on the New Testament.

Arthur Rouser received an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Divinity at Elmhurst College, a U.C.C. college in Illinois. A citation also saluted Colonial Church for "nurturing Arthur during his long career with Colonial by encouraging him in these areas in a way few congregations do."

Over 2,000 singles are involved in Colonial's ministry.

Attending Senior P.F. consistently are 150 teens.

Membership is 3,400. Budget is \$1,582,958.

1985

Papers were uncovered in Granada which proved that President Bishop was an avowed Marxist intent on becoming a satellite of the Soviet Union.

In Bangladesh, a tidal wave and flood killed over 20,000.

The Ethiopian famine was brought to the forefront of the world's conscience by television pictures of the starving.

Tornadoes devastated a number of towns in Ohio and Pennsylvania, killing 91. The damage was over \$245 million.

A TWA jet was hijacked by Lebanese terrorists, with 35 held hostage for two weeks. One young navy man was shot and killed.

Arthur Rouser returned to Africa, visiting Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda and Tanzania with Africa Team IV.

Andy Overman was accepted as a doctoral candidate in New Testament studies at Boston University School of Theology.

The Rev. Darlene Stensby resigned to assume a full pastoral position.

There were 79 in the confirmation class.

A remodeling project completed in September included a larger nursery, new preschool room for four year olds, a new meeting room for junior and senior high, a new receptionist area, a library off the Common and additional offices on the second floor of the Administration Building.

The Easter offering for African hunger was \$102,000.

Three charter members died: Olive Edwards, Harold Young and Lawrence Wilson.

Dr. Rouner went to Ethiopia in June, along with Colonial members Al Johnson, Ted Meads and Janet Leadholm. The \$5 million he privately raised will go for the development of small dams, wells and irrigation projects.

Membership was 3,478.

1986

The space shuttle Challenger exploded after launching from Cape Canaveral, killing all seven aboard.

President Marcos fled the Philippines after 20 years of rule.

Desmond Tutu was elected archbishop of South Africa.

Chernobyl nuclear plant exploded.

The first "Pilgrim Presence" team went to Kiwawa to assist Dick and Jane Hamilton with a Bible school program for 300 Pokot children.

Missions giving was almost \$400,000.

The Rev. J. Bradley McNaught became the Minister of Singles and Outreach.

Deborah Howland came on staff as the Minister to Children and Families.

The late Dr. George Eitel left a \$1 ³⁴²million gift to Colonial.

The budget was \$1.7 million and was over-pledged.

A \$6.5 million Capital Fund Drive, "Touched by the Spirit," was started for the expansion of Colonial's facilities.

Our Easter offering for African hunger was \$106,000.

There were 140 members of the Colonial Chorale.

Charter members Chester Nordeen and Bower Hawthorne died.

A fourteen week series of half hour television programs, "Along the Way," was aired on K.A.R.E. TV. During that time, the largest worship attendance period in our history was recorded.

1987

The Supreme Court ruled that Rotary Clubs must admit women.

Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher won an unprecedented third term.

A severe earthquake hit Los Angeles.

Colonial membership was 3,700.

A small dormitory, Pilgrim Place, was constructed in Kenya to house our African mission teams. It was dedicated by the three teams sent in January.

Mission Board funds were budgeted to encourage Colonial's people to do short term mission projects in Africa or elsewhere in the world.

Our first new member class numbering 100 was received in March.

A March Church Meeting decided to proceed with television evangelism on a 26 Sunday annual basis.

Plans for Colonial's building expansion were approved.

Arthur Rouner's ninth book, "Struggling With Sex," was published.

"The Triumph of Christ" was presented twice during Lent to full houses.

Special offerings for hunger and Christian Volunteers of Minnesota totalled \$122,000.

Another staff member was added to the counseling ministry, totalling three senior staff, plus many volunteers for support groups.

The church operated with a full staff without replacements or vacancies.

The budget was \$1.9 million and was filled in conjunction with building campaign pledges.

1988

Former President Jimmy Carter preached at Colonial in the fall as part of his Global Conflict Resolution project.

The United States and Canada reached a free trade agreement.

A U.S. Navy ship shot down an Iranian airliner in the Persian Gulf, mistaking it for a jet fighter, killing 290.

The Soviet legislature approved political restructuring and a new national legislature.

Pan Am Flight 747 exploded from a terrorist bomb in Lockerbie, Scotland, killing 259 on board and 11 on the ground.

Dr. Gary W. Klingsporn became our new Teaching Minister, replacing Dr. Bob Guelich who left to be on the staff of Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California.

We moved into our new building expansion facilities in the fall, on time and under budget.

The Gathering Groups during the new Learning Hour flourished and maintained a constant level of attendance for both adults and children throughout the year.

Vicki Heagerty replaced Deb Howland as Director of Children's Ministries.

1989

Emperor Hirohito died at the age of 87.

George Bush was inaugurated as the 41st President of the United States.

The tanker Exxon Valdez ruptured and sent 11 million gallons of crude oil into Prince William Sound.

Thousands of students rallied for democracy in Beijing's central square.

Mikhail Gorbachev was named Soviet President.

Colin Powell became the first black to be named chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

After 28 years, the Berlin Wall came down.

Heidi Stensby was hired as full-time Junior High Director.

The Evangelism/Communications Board was established.

The budget reached \$2,1 million plus.

Membership was 3,600.

Special offerings totalled \$132,000.

Colonial agreed to help plant a new church in Chanhassen, known as Colonial Church at Heritage Square. The Rev. Cindy Shepherd was called as minister.

"Along the Way" television program began 10:00 a.m. Sunday broadcasting.

The number of adults and children during the Learning Hour continued to improve, bringing increasing need for more staffing.

A Licensed Consulting Psychologist and two directors in Spiritual Growth were added in the counseling ministry.

The Rev. Keith Tussing became the Minister of Developing and Planning, a new position.

1990

South Africa freed Nelson Mandela after being in prison for 27 1/2 years.

The United States and Soviet Union reached accord on armaments.

Iraqi troops invaded Kuwait and seized petroleum reserves, setting off the Persian Gulf War.

East and West Germany were reunited.

John Major succeeded Margaret Thatcher.

Lech Walesa became President of Poland.

The Colonial Foundation established the Heritage Society to recognize donors of deferred gifts.

The Pilgrim Way Bookshop was opened on Palm Sunday.

The Colonial Chorale traveled to Austria in July.

The Rev. K. David Hargrove, Minister of Music, died after a long and courageous battle with cancer. His musical gifts and theatrical presentations will long be remembered.

Youth mission trips went to Denver, Tennessee, Washington, D.C. and Tijuana, Mexico. One hundred kids attended Camp Pyro.

Job Transition Support Group numbered 150 - 220 people.

Gathering Groups continued to grow, having 350 - 400 in weekly attendance.

Brad McNaught left to head a local foundation.

Colonial decided to increase the missions contribution percentage from 25% to 30% over the next three years.

In November, Greg Snell joined the staff as Minister of Missions and Outreach.

Operating fund expenditures were \$2.3 million. Missions giving was \$483,000.

Charter member Neva Johnson died.

Membership as of April 1 was 3,725.

1991

The U.N. forces³⁴⁴ won the Persian Gulf War.

Boris Yeltsin was inaugurated as the first freely elected President of the Russian Republic.

Israel and Soviet Union resumed relations after 24 years.

The Soviet Union broke up.

The Rev. David L. Williamson, after 25 years at Colonial, resigned to take a position at Hollywood Presbyterian Church in California.

Television production went into a hiatus due to lack of funding within the church budget.

The Rev. Peter J. Smith became Minister of Evangelism and Pastoral Care in February.

New bridges of friendship were built through many journeys to Native American reservations.

Special offerings given at Easter, Thanksgiving and Lent totalled \$154,000.

Dr. Bob Guelich, a former Teaching Minister twice and long time Colonial friend and confidant, died in July while at his Lake Vermillion cabin. He was 51.

More than 26 Colonial people participated in short term international and regional missions, not including the youth who went on summer mission trips.

Karl Zinsmeister came as Director of Music and Arts.

The Rev. Edwin Anderson became the new Minister of Pastoral Counseling.

A Williamsburg Christmas was a great success for its first time on Advent's first Sunday.

"Colonial on Christmas Eve" was on prime time television in India to 300 million people on Christmas Eve.

Membership was 3,765. The budget was \$2.1 million.

1992

Presidents Bush and Yeltsin proclaimed a formal ending of the Cold War.

The last western hostages were freed in Lebanon.

U.S. forces left the Philippines after nearly a century of military presence.

Bill Clinton was elected President.

Colonial committed to being involved in the Interfaith Hospitality Network, a program for families who need a safe place to be after recently losing their homes. Colonial houses the group four times each year and involves hundreds of volunteers.

Operating fund income did not make expenditures and for the third year in a row, there was a decrease in spending and that was monitored closely.

Vacation Bible School was held in the evening for the first time.

Over 250 volunteers worked in the Children's Ministry.

About 100 junior and senior high kids went on mission trips.

Habitat For Humanity had 125 Colonial volunteers helping to build a home in the city during a summer week.

Membership was 3,700. Missions distributed \$474,000 and there was \$156,000 collected in special offerings.

1993

Janet Reno was named as Attorney General.

The World Trade Center was bombed.

Israeli - Palestinian accord was reached.

The Brady Bill was signed.

The C.I.A. reported that North Korea had an atomic bomb.

On the first Sunday in Lent, Arthur Rouner offered his resignation, effective September 1, 1994. In an excerpt taken from his letter in the Annual Report of 1993, he stated that *"this will give me an*

opportunity to do what I can while still here to help a healing process happen and to develop some repositioning of our staff for the near future. The perception has been that our \$300,000 shortfall in our Stewardship Campaign and our diminished worship attendance needed a change in leadership. While I had hoped to stay and see in both our fiftieth year and the millennium together with you, the good of this Christian company means far more to me than those privileges.... Once we've all rested up from our many meetings and emotions, I believe the future will look full of excitement and possibility. We can only look to Jesus for it. We can only trust Him. He is our one great hope and He has always led us in the past. Let us allow Him to lead us now."

The church actually entered a period of grieving as it lost several staff through downsizing because of diminished financial resources.

The approach to stewardship went to year-long funding. More people were giving, but were not pledging. Even though we were in transition, 1993 ended with the budget being fully supported at around \$2 million.

Archbishop John Roach delivered a homily at a joint celebration with Colonial and Our Lady of Grace.

Rabbi Norman Cohen of Hopkins was a frequent guest speaker.

A Singles Conference in the fall had 800 in attendance.

November's Country Market had nearly 100 exhibitors.

Membership was 3,664.

1994

A major earthquake in Los Angeles left 51 dead.

President Clinton ended the trade embargo on Viet Nam.

Thousands died in Rwanda tribal warfare.

U.S. planes bombed Serbian targets.

Baseball owners ended the season and canceled the World Series.

Israel and Jordan sign a peace treaty.

During the winter, a Conference on Fathering brought in 500 people.

The Robert Guelich Memorial Lectureship was inaugurated in March.

Because of Arthur Rouner's retirement, tributes to his 32 year ministry occurred throughout the year. These included a re-enacted Devilish Dialogue, complete with Maurice Fetty's return and a Youth Concert in April.

In June, a Celebration of Love was held for Arthur and Molly Rouner and their family. Eight hundred people came for a catered sit-down dinner, complete with strolling musicians and waiters from Christ Presbyterian Church. A program featuring music, skits, a video and special tributes followed in the Meetinghouse, which was more than filled to capacity.

Camp Pyro II had 120 kids at Covenant Pines for one week in August.

In the fall, Rev. Dr. John R. Cionca came to serve as Interim Senior Minister.

A Praise Service was started at the 10:30 worship hour, keeping 9:00 as it traditionally had been.

Ed Anderson resigned as Counseling Minister.

Membership was 3,673. Budget for the year was \$1.9 million. Missions allocated \$386,000. A total of 130 ministries were supported, with \$163,900 going to Africa, Native American reservations and local food shelves.

1995

The Congress convened with the G.O.P. in control.

A shaky truce began in Bosnia.

The baseball strike ended.

Donna Bennett came as part-time staff psychologist January 1 to provide continuity until another Counseling Minister is in place.

Kathy Tolo, Youth Education Coordinator, was let go because of budget cuts. This also was true for the Rev. Peter Smith, whose position as Minister of Evangelism and Pastoral Care was eliminated.

Karl Zinsmeister, Director of Music, left for a position in Mississippi.

In the Annual Report, Moderator Rich Voelbel had these words: "Our boards have been tirelessly ministering to us, to encourage the Colonial family...so many gone, a year of pain, a year of transition without Arthur, our Senior Minister of 32 years, and yes, a year of healing. Some long days and long nights with our risen Lord."

And from John Cionca, "The role of an Interim Minister is to take the baton from a pastor finishing his current race and pass it on to the pastor who will run the next leg of the journey ...let me state unequivocally that I've enjoyed every minute of my time with you and I would not have traded this opportunity to be part of your ministry team for all of the theology books in Germany. I know of no other congregation that seeks to renew its liberal denomination, embraces the new winds of the Holy Spirit, lifts up a high view of Christ and the scriptures, welcomes worship with brothers and sisters in the Catholic Church, hosts a Village School of the Bible, distributes Jesus videos, and ministers from Edina to Ethiopia.... My desire as your Interim Senior Minister is to leave Colonial Church feeling more confident in God's future for her than she did before I arrived..... I trust in God's ongoing guidance for his church."

Dr. J. Andrew Overman came for the Guelich Lectureship.

Colonial All Together was started on Wednesday evenings, with church suppers, choir practice, Bible studies and Kids' Clubs.

In August the Senior Minister Search Committee, headed by Jay Bennett, presented the Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher as its choice. He was unanimously approved at the Church Meeting. David started his duties November 1, becoming Colonial's third Senior Minister in its 50 year history. He and his wife Gloria moved from Boston where he had served as Senior Minister of Park Street Church.

In the fall, Tim Sawyer came on board as Choir Director, and Amy Kahl as the Praise Service Music Leader.

The 1995 budget reduced the mission giving from its historic 25% to 22%. Trustees were the Stewardship Committee for this budget and established spending at \$1,678,000.

Membership was 3,637.

1996 Newt Gingrich became the Speaker of the House.

There was an earthquake in Japan.

The Federal Building was bombed in Oklahoma City.

The United Nations observed its 50th anniversary.

Women's Suffrage celebrated its 75th anniversary.

Membership was 2,988. The significant drop was due to carefully surveying the rolls during the past year in preparation of a directory. People who were gone from the area with no forwarding addresses and with whom there had been no contact for a period of time were moved to inactive status.

In a deeply moving and inspirational service, David Fisher was installed as Colonial's Senior Minister in February.

The Rev. Gregory J. Snell, Minister of Missions and Outreach, and his wife Deb, left March 1 to be full-time missionaries in Kenya.

The Rev. Jeffrey M. Lindsay, our Youth Minister since 1984, became the Minister of Missions and Outreach on June 1.

Karen Aubrey became the Church Business Administrator in May.

Colonial was on-line, entering the era of electronic publishing on the Internet, making news of Jesus and activities of the church available to a wide audience. It was also a connection to far flung members and missionaries through e-mail.

Since the mission funds have decreased 50% in the past seven years, the number of ministries supported were reduced from 149 to 88.

A Capital Fund Drive was started to eliminate the mortgage debt.

A Thursday night worship service was instituted for the summer months. Summer Sunday worship went to one 9:00 service starting May 26.

The Jubilee Celebration of Colonial's 50 years was held on June 16. Festivities included an extended Sunday service with a choral work written by Charles Forsberg, reminiscences by Arthur Rouner and David Fisher's sermon, "Jubilate." A picnic for the whole church family followed in Countryside Park. A commemorative quilt was made by numerous members and Bibles containing Colonial's history were published for those who wanted a historic remembrance.

Looking to the Future

From David Fisher's Annual Report, "How can any of us measure the impact of this one church that has touched so many lives? Part of the answer is the thousands of people who've been part of our congregation's life over these years. Certainly one answer is the quality of leadership that has marked our life from the beginning. But most important of all is the fact that from the beginning until now, this place and its people have laid hands on our souls and shaped our lives. We'll never be the same. Only God knows how to measure that.

Now we are in the midst of an 'in-between time.' We're celebrating a great past while beginning a new future. These are exciting days of change, anticipation and rebuilding. In fact, it's a lot of fun to be part of this transition into the Colonial of the 21st century....

So, building on that past and present, we are in a unique position. Most important, God put us here! We have the wonderful opportunity to use all the uniqueness of this congregation to engage a new generation in the journey of a lifetime.

I don't know about you, but I think the view from 1996 is spectacular. Looking back there's the beauty of a great history and ministry. Looking forward, I see enough challenges and opportunities to keep us busy for 50 more years."

A tree has borne fruit!

COLONIAL ***CHURCH***



6200 COLONIAL WAY / EDINA, MINNESOTA 55436

THE NAMING AND BLESSING OF THE ROOMS

SUNDAY AFTERNOON, FEBRUARY 18, 1979

4:00 o'clock

A WELCOME

PRAYER TOGETHER

READING OF THE NAMES WITH BRIEF EXPLANATION

PROCESSIONAL TO THE ROOMS FOR PRAYER OF BLESSING

* * * *

FOLLOWING THIS DEDICATION

6:00 P.M. -- FIRST SUPPER FOR THE CHURCH FAMILY
in the new "John Robinson Great Hall"
Introduction of Special Guests for the Evening
Service. Showing of the Colonial Multi-Media
Slide Show.

7:30 P.M. -- THE FIRST DEDICATION SERVICE
with Dr. George W. Webber Preaching
Mr. Richard Hammel, Architect
Mr. Charles Geer, Building Committee Chairman

* * * *

THE MEETINGHOUSE - It was the belief of the Pilgrims and Puritans that the "church" was the people, never the building. They insisted their simple, clapboard buildings, in which the church worshipped and where town meetings were held, were their "meeting-houses." Because Colonial feels we too are here to be met by God, and to meet each other, and that the community too, will meet here for concerts, plays and lectures that this beautiful room should be our "Meetinghouse."

THE ANN BRADSTREET HEARTH ROOM - Ann Bradstreet is

creating for them a written language and finally translating the whole Bible into what is now called the Algonquin Bible. Linguistic scholars today marvel at the achievement, for even with the help of computers it takes today fifteen years to learn primitive tribal languages, to translate them, and to produce even one New Testament book.

THE WILLIAM BRADFORD ADMINISTRATION BUILDING - William Bradford was the Pilgrims chronicler and Plymouth Plantation's second governor. His History of Plimouth Plantation is the best record we have of the Pilgrims' life, and customs, and faith. He was the one who told their story and preserved their "way" and their dreams for us. As the place of writing, and reading, and planning, and organizing to carry on the ministry and mission of a large company of pilgrims in a new day, the "Bradford Building" seems a good name for reminding us of our on-going task.

THE JONATHAN EDWARDS READING ROOM - The leader of the "Great Awakening" in American Christianity in the middle of the 18th century, Jonathan Edwards was not only a great and faithful pastor to his people in Northampton, Massachusetts, but he has come to be regarded as America's greatest native philosopher. His work as thinker, pastor, philosopher, and evangelist was to bring a balance to the charismatic and national elements in Christian experience. He is one of the great models for devotional, pastoral, prophetic and scholarly ministry today. He spent many hours of thinking and writing in his study. The library reading room is appropriately named for him.

THE SAMUEL AND GIDEON POND FELLOWSHIP ROOM - In 1838 two Congregational laymen came as missionaries to Minnesota and ministered to Ojibway Indians, teaching and doing New Testament translation for them. Their cabin and chapel was on the site of the present St. Mary's Greek Orthodox Church on the east shore of Lake Calhoun. Later they were ordained as Presbyterian ministers. While they came fifty years after the American Revolution, they were pioneers out of the Pilgrim spirit, and are a vital part of our Minnesota heritage. The lovely room for gatherings of youth and

adult "fellowship" groups, looking out upon beautiful ponds, seemed a natural for the Pond brothers. Indeed, the Krafft family and the Webster family of Colonial claim direct ancestry to the Ponds.

one of the great poets of the colonial period in America. Because poetry was frowned on by the Puritans as an unnecessary adornment to the simple, direct life of faith centered in a high regard for the Word of God as the only significant literature for people of faith, and also because women did not yet have an acknowledged place of leadership in the colonies, Ann Bradstreet's poetry writing was solitary and secretive. Her poems were tucked away in shoeboxes and only after her death were they discovered. This "Hearth Room" will be appropriately used for the exciting dialogue, and daring, questing thought of the seminaries and studies, as well as a gathering place for Colonial's women.

THE GOVERNOR JOHN CARVER COMMON - The "Common" in colonial times was the gathering place around which homes and principle buildings were placed, usually with the church at the head of the common, or the "green." John Carver was elected Governor of Plimouth Plantation even before the Pilgrims set foot on Cape Cod and later Plimouth itself. He was the first governor ever elected anywhere in the world by the free consent of the people. We name the fireside gathering place and the long "street" to the Sunday School building for him because it is the gathering area for our common life.

THE JOHN ROBINSON GREAT HALL - John Robinson was first the teacher, and then the pastor, of the little congregation in Scrooby, England. These were "the Pilgrims" who left England under persecution and lived and worshipped and wrote tracts first in Amsterdam, where they had close connections with a Baptist congregation, and then in Leyden. Through Robinson's irenic spirit may have come the more liberal teaching of Erasmus tempering the Calvinist theology of his Puritan Separatist faith. Robinson stayed behind with half of the Scrooby congregation. Those who sailed for America he cautioned to be open to close relations with the England Puritans, for he said, "God hath yet more truth and light to break forth from His Holy Word." That expectant, open, tolerant, learning spirit seems well suited to our "Great Hall" for eating and meeting together, for children's education and adult lectures,

and the making of new friends by us all.

THE ABIGAIL ADAMS KITCHEN - The wife of John Adams, second president of the new United States of America, Abigail Adams was an independent woman who spoke up to her husband and others about women's suffrage back in revolutionary times. Her work in running the farm in Braintree during the long periods when her husband was away at the Continental Congress or as Ambassador to France, had everything to do with the ability of the family to function, and indeed, for John Adams himself, in his critically important work for the Republic.

THE SARAH PIERPONT EDWARDS SUNDAY SCHOOL BUILDING - This place for the children is named for Sarah Pierpont Edwards, wife of Jonathan Edwards, minister in Northampton, Massachusetts, and mother of many remarkably gifted children. From Sarah Edwards' home came one of the great families of America, boasting in succeeding generations a staggering number of ministers, lawyers, doctors, judges, college presidents, homemakers -- and Aaron Burr. Sarah knew children and knew God, and her courageous colonial pre-revolutionary teaching and raising of children and young people still stands as an example to us all.

THE JOHN WOOLMAN QUIET ROOM - A young tailor of Quaker persuasion, also in the 18th century, John Woolman became an impassioned Christian evangelist for the peace cause in his time, and traveled hundreds of miles to spread his Quaker concerns for reform and for peace. His witness to peace and prayer makes his an inspiring ecumenical name to be attached to the little quiet room between two studies where our staff prays each morning.

THE JOHN ELIOT LIBRARY - This center of learning and research in Biblical literature and religious study is named for the Puritan minister of the Roxbury parish in Massachusetts Bay, the Rev. John Eliot, known as the "Apostle to the Indians" for his patient and loving ministry to the Indian people whom he visited on horseback every Sunday after his own services, gathering them into villages and teaching them of Christ. In the process he undertook the prodigious task of learning the spoken language of the Algonquins, then

APPENDIX C
TAG DISCOVERY REPORT

Colonial Church Edina, MN

January 2018

Discovery Report for Visioning Retreats

Introduction from TAG

Colonial Church contracted with TAG Consulting to assess your congregation to prepare for a visioning process. TAG is a management consulting and coaching firm headquartered in Fairfax, VA, just outside Washington, DC. We specialize in executive coaching, leadership development and visioning. Our client mix includes all three major sectors: **public** (government agencies); **social** (faith-based, churches, and nonprofits) and **private** (businesses and corporations). We have worked with over 400 congregations of all sizes from a wide variety of denominations. Kevin Ford and Todd Hahn are the consultants on this project.

TAG Consulting's Core Values are:

- **Creating Hope**
- **Making a Difference**
- **Systems Thinking**
- **Going for It**
- **Having Fun**
- **Caring for Others**

During the process, we gathered information from the following sources:

- Advance documentation (membership trends, financial trends, demographic information, church history, issues identified by the pastor, and ministry information);
- Transforming Church Insight (a congregational survey that compares your church to national norms);
- Focus groups and/or interviews with various leaders in your church (Staff Leaders, Parents of Children, Parents of Youth, Key Lay Leaders, Volunteers, and Short, Mid and Long time members);
- A demographic study (7 mile radius) of your local community.
- Prevailing Talents staff assessment

Our purpose in gathering this information was to provide the church with an understanding of its current realities, and to help identify the key strategic issues for the visioning process. Please review this report carefully as you prepare for the planning session.

Table of Contents:

1. Preparing for the Visioning Retreats
2. Executive Summary
3. Prevailing Talents Profiles
4. Basic Context (Information Provided by the Church)
5. Demographic Report Executive Summary
6. Transforming Church Index Executive Summary
7. Focus Group Comments

1.0 Preparing for the Visioning Retreats

We will meet for three retreats: Retreat 1 March 3-4, Retreat 2 April 14-15 and Retreat 3 May 19-20. The retreats will be Saturday (9-3PM) and Sunday (1PM-4PM). All retreat participants should have a copy of this report and bring it with them to the retreats. Here are some first steps to keep in mind as you prepare:

- We recommended that the visioning retreat consist of 25-28 participants from the leadership of the church (church board, key staff and key lay leaders). We also request that the same people participate in each retreat.
- Please review this report carefully, along with the articles at the end. Take notes from this discovery report. Write down your questions. Think through the church's key strengths, weaknesses, future opportunities, and potential threats.
- Required Reading: Have all planning participants read at least one of the two following books by TAG authors: *The Leadership Triangle* (Kevin Graham Ford and Ken Tucker, Morgan James Publishing, 2013); *Red Zone/Blue Zone: Turning Conflict into Opportunity* (James P. Osterhaus, Joseph Jurkowski, and Todd Hahn, Familius, 2015)
- The meetings will begin with some basic education on visioning and related concepts. We will be in breakout groups for a good portion of our time together. This allows for greater participation and input. We will generally focus our time on developing several of the major components of your strategic plan: core values, mission, strategy, and initiatives.
- The visioning sessions are not designed to develop detailed action plans nor budget forecasts. Neither is this traditional long-range planning. Our purpose is to discover and preserve your church's identity, while clarifying the general direction for your church over the next several years. Your church's leadership should develop action planning and budgeting after the visioning plan is completed.

2.0 Executive Summary

Here's What's Going Great

Your Children's and Youth Ministry Are Points of Pride and Significant Draws

Parents love your children's ministry and they love the leadership of Marie Wonders and her team.

"The highlight of my child's week is running down that hallway".

"Marie does an amazing job of connecting kids, supporting families, and giving them things to talk about during the week that nurture the faith of children".

In your Top Five TCI Facets, 'Families' scored number two, at the 45th national percentile.

While parents feel that they over-tasked in terms of being asked to volunteer, they were nearly unanimous in expressing confidence in leadership and the quality of the Sunday morning program.

In addition, Carter has been well received in his new (partial) role as youth ministry leader. There is a significant sense of relief that, after a period of uncertainty and turnover, the youth ministry is stable and focused hands.

Given the demographics of your region, a foundation of a strong youth and children's ministry is an excellent building block.

Your People Love Your Building

Your physical building was designed with great specificity and intentionality. And your people love it.

To a large degree, they are aware of its historic pedigree and appreciate the nuances of that.

By a long shot, this is the highest percentile score on the TCI – you are in the 80th percentile as to Building!

“Our buildings and property are visually appealing from the outside” scored in the 94th percentile with only 1% negative (negative scores are “1” or “2” on the 5 point scale). This was your highest scoring individual question on the TCI

People appreciate its spaciousness, its warmth (symbolized by the four working fireplaces) and its utility. They are aware and appreciative of the consonance between your Congregational ethos and the feel and frame of your building. According to the TCI, your facilities do an excellent job of promoting mingling and fellowship, and supporting your children’s ministries.

“I just love to walk in here. It feels like home and it has for many years.”

“It’s like when you are blessed with a beautiful home and you really want to invite friends and family over so you can bless them”.

“I think our physical plant sets us up to really serve the community”.

“We have a Meeting House, not just a church building”.

There is a caveat to this in that your congregation feels that the building may be underutilized but that does not diminish the real sense of pride and connection people feel to your physical space.

Your Congregation Loves Your Worship Experiences

A constant theme: we are able to do both traditional and contemporary well, especially the music. Both types of services, in spite of their very different constituencies, are valued and esteemed. On the TCI, you scored in the 76th percentile on “People really like our church’s music”, with only 4% negative.

“Mark Stover is unusually gifted, can lead all types of music and all types of people”

“It’s hard to describe how great our music ministry and services are”

“We do an incredible job of special events – like Christmas. I cry every year at a specific moment in our Christmas services. The staff goes out of their way to make these moments special and that makes it easy to invite people”.

There are also a substantial number of congregants who speak of Daniel's sermons as being a transformative part of their spiritual formation. Colonial, to be sure, has had a rich legacy of teaching excellence. Most if not all of your senior pastors were accomplished preachers. And you had a nearly half-century long tradition of 'teaching pastors' whose role was designed to be studying and proclaiming biblical truth.

But a substantial number of Focus Group members report being inspired by Daniel's ability to integrate Christian faith and practice with the physical and philosophical worlds and to introduce creative teaching aids such as cooking during the worship service!

At least three Focus Group members told us they had looked for this sort of integration of Christian thought and preaching for most of their adult lives.

Here's What Needs Attention

Relational Connection Is Generally Weak

It's not terrible, but it's not optimal, and your people crave it. Often, when relational connection is weak, we can point to facilities that don't support fellowship. In fact, the opposite is true. Despite facilities that do support gathering and mingling, the church is weak on relational connections.

In the TCI, you rank in the 28th percentile on Relationships.

What was striking was that in the Focus Groups, we heard a yearning from both older and younger for deeper, more significant relationships.

Older folks (20+ years of connection) hearkened back to a relational golden age under previous, highly relational leaders. They remarked upon a time when anyone entering the doors was connected and introduced to someone else who was sharing a similar stage in life. Many reported that these connections endured throughout decades and generations.

Younger folks (parents of children and youth) report a similar desire for connection. Some have found it in serving, but often those serving feel overtaxed and disconnected from the larger congregation.

"We love to serve and to see the people we see week to week. But we see the same people!"

“There’s never a break here if you are the parent of a kid and also are committed and diligent to serve. We could use – actually we NEED – more childcare. What parents like us never get is quiet and rest – and here we just tend to get more of the same rush”.

Some parents bring their laptops to church and do work on Wednesday night. They’d like to connect – to find something for them – but the next best thing is having a place for their kids and a little quiet...to work in isolation. Other parents report longing to get to go into the worship service and find spiritual solace for themselves – but continue serving out of a deep commitment to children seeing familiar faces each week.

There’s not much of a small group infrastructure. We see this in churches that have a centralized model of leadership and those churches have to work to overcome it. To be sure, just “adding small groups” is not a fix for relational disconnection – it can be a purely tactical solution. But robust small group ministry is generally indicative of a healthy relational culture.

It’s Difficult To Engage Volunteers

People at Colonial want to be involved in significant, spiritually lasting ways. This is not a consumer-oriented congregation and it never has been.

But there is often confusion and disorientation about how to actually get involved. Older members hearken back to a physical “ministry needs” board outside the worship area where members could gather before, between, and after services to see who was sick, giving birth, bereaved, and needing help. That space was a sort of open-air market for ministry involvement.

In a digital world, this may not be the best solution, but it does seem clear that Colonial lacks an infrastructure, process, or adequate staff support to identify areas needing volunteer support and integration, and leading to assimilation and involvement.

Early in his tenure, Daniel replaced committees of long standing with mission-specific task forces. Many other churches have done the same over the last several decades. But it seemed as if the abolition of the committee structure at Colonial has left a vacuum of ministry involvement. Current ministries do not tend to recruit new involvement, relying on the same rotation of volunteers. Some former committee members, missing the structure and focus of that work, have fallen away from involvement altogether.

-Committees used to be a meeting of the minds, where the best and most committed worked together to find solutions and new approaches. Granted, they could be cumbersome! But they connected people and we have not replaced that.

To be clear, we are not advocating a return of committees to Colonial. But we do note that nothing has sufficiently replaced them at Colonial as a way of integrating new and fairly-new folks into service in the life of the church and the community. We are certain that systems must be in place to ensure that folks can move from first-time attender to significant and invested contributor in short order.

The Congregation Is Concerned That It Is Aging And Not Renewing Itself

We heard an awful lot of comments like this one from the open-ended questions portion of the TCI and from Focus Groups:

“Too many grey heads (mine included)! We are an aging congregation. Those of sixty and older are the majority and it should be the other way around”.

“I love the multi-generational aspect of our church. I learn so much from older men and women. But I also think our generation, people in our place in life, need to be represented. I don’t know that we are. I hope the process we are in now leads to that – please represent us!”.

There’s no disputing the fact that Colonial’s demographic is aging and that this is not entirely in consonance with what is happening in your seven-mile radius. In fact the opposite is true.

What’s interesting is that no one in your congregation seems to be accepting that this as it should be.

While virtually everyone we have spoken with and surveyed prizes the multi-generational richness of your congregation, virtually all also see warning signals in the gradual (and at least perceived recently rapid) aging of the congregation.

Younger members are restless. They have great respect and admiration for older members, prize their involvement in their childrens’ lives and want the church to remain multi-generational. But at the same time, they see their friends, neighbors, and coworkers flocking to other local churches that are attracting people like them and wonder how Colonial can remain relevant.

Too, they wonder if their voices will be heard and respected in days to come.

Our demographic research revealed that in 2020 the average age in your target area will be 40.8. This indicates that those in the current “younger generation” at Colonial (young families) are right in the heart of who you want to reach right now.

Older members, to be sure, long for the halcyon days when Colonial was the respected church in the region. But their affections are not tied to size and influence. They want Colonial to be the thriving, vibrant, relevant place for multiple generations they remember it being. They are concerned with legacy. They are willing to change and to see Colonial reach younger generations again.

It's not entirely clear that the various generations see a common path forward to accomplish this goal. That will be a significant portion of our work with you – achieving alignment around core principles.

But we note that there is very little of “Keep this place like it was!” or “Throw the old guard out!”. There is a genuine, deep-seated desire to craft a church culture which is sustaining and faithful.

There Is A Tension and Lack of Alignment Over Your Past vs. Your Future

The overwhelming central issue at Colonial is a lack of vision, or future clarity. You scored in the 6th percentile on “Vision” with 32% negative. In TAG's analysis of the 11 million records in our TCI database, Vision is by far the greatest differentiator between healthy churches (who scored in the top 20% overall) and the unhealthy churches (who scored in the bottom 20% overall). And the lack of shared vision is a primary driver for the other issues above. When people lack a shared vision, they don't feel connected to each other. They aren't willing to volunteer. And they don't embrace change.

The church history given to TAG states:

The tag line for Colonial Church for decades has been: A Place to Grow in Christ and Serve the World. But a meaningful debate about each of the elements of this statement has been brewing among members:

- **Place**—*How should we care for our beautiful but costly building and grounds, and how we might cover the expense of continuing repairs and improvements?*

- **Grow**—*What does growth look like and mean for Colonial? Are our declining numbers a sign that we need to appeal to and reach out to add to our company those who will join us in following Christ, or is it a sign of being refined and reduced by Christ to grow deeper in his love and service?*
- **Serve**—*Colonial has had a long tradition of service to the community and to world missions. A great many of the members contribute to significant ministries outside the official auspices of Colonial Church. Should these ministries be embraced and celebrated in some way? Should the core missions and ministries of the church be redefined and redirected in new ways?*

In many ways, this sums up nicely your current struggle and opportunity:

Who is Colonial Church to be in light of our past, in the reality of our present, and in the hope of our future?

There is some really great news on this front. Your people long to make a difference, and to be difference-makers. Peruse the Focus Group comments if you have any doubt. No one advocates hunkering down.

But there is a lack of alignment around what your future should be. In the paragraphs below, we suggest a reframe of your self-understanding from Colonial as an expression of Christendom to Colonial as missional community.

We anticipate that on the face of it this would meet with broad approval.

But that consensus might be fleeting.

Is missional Colonial what it used to be – the center of the community, the ‘place to be’, the place where generations of folks from Edina and environs looked for spiritual sustenance and guidance?

Or is it something entirely new – new wineskins?

You have extraordinary strengths: your theological diversity, your rich heritage as a place for excellent teaching and worship, your legacy as a community where generations of kids and youth received their spiritual formation, your remarkable physical environment.

But you also have challenges: the reality that you are aging, your differences over what connected community looks like, the tension between being well-resourced established congregation and striving missionary community.

Two examples:

1. The sale of the Waters property has introduced the very best sort of problem to have. What do we do with 4.5 million dollars? But this very challenge is exposing competing values: do we use it to preserve, or to innovate, or to come up with some hybrid of both? Maybe we should give it away? This poses the great question for Colonial: are we a bastion of the Christian faith (broadly construed) or are we a fluid, risk-taking missional outpost? Which is most consistent with our code? What fits our history best – and our current opportunities best? How do we get alignment around that?
2. What do the recent experiments with Upper Room and Innove mean for us? We heard overwhelming enthusiasm for Innove's premise – its willingness to give away resources, energy, and time from Colonial to serve the community. But we also heard that it perhaps had a shelf life and never fully galvanized the church in a way that moved from approbation to passion. But it was a new thing that was in keeping with your past legacy. Is there a hint here, a God-given glimmer, of what a new missional Colonial might look and be like? And everyone loves the energy that Upper Room has brought. But there doesn't yet seem to be a thoroughly conceived sense of what full missional partnership can look like.

"Changes are readily embraced by our congregation" scored in the 6th percentile with 58% negative responses.

As you read through the following, please be aware that what we are suggesting is not a new program or a new ministry or even, necessarily, a new vision. What we are suggesting is a new world view - a new way of thinking, behaving, and acting – given a changed context. For a church that doesn't easily embrace change, this will be a difficult path forward. But it may be the only path.

A Way Forward: From Christendom to Missional; From Meeting House To Missional Center

Christendom

To understand the challenges and opportunities that Colonial Church faces it is important to consider the significant changes that have taken place in society since Martin Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses at All Saints Church in Wittenberg, Germany, 500 years ago. Even before the year 1517 the Catholic Church had influence within much of the civilized world. Political and institutional influence began as a seed sown early in the 4th Century when Roman Emperor Constantine reversed previous

emperors' decisions to persecute Christians. Less than two generations later, Christianity would become the official state religion of the entire Roman Empire. As the emperor conquered new lands he expected—even required—those subjugated to adopt Christianity.

This was the beginning of Christendom. Merriam-Webster defines Christendom as: “the part of the world in which Christianity prevails.” Over nearly two millennia Christendom was the norm in the Western world. A study of western culture will show that the church and state were at times integrated very closely and, sometimes, one and the same.

The date was June 6, 1946 and the location was Brooklyn, NY. It was a Thursday and yet, public schools were closed for the day so that ninety-thousand school children could participate in a parade that was attended by the Mayor of Brooklyn, the Governor of NY and a U.S. Supreme Court Justice. What type of event would bring this many children and important figures together? Answer: The 117th Annual Sunday School Parade.

Church and society were so integrated that if you were a part of one you were expected to be a part of the other. In Christendom there were very few mega-churches. The church was parish-based and thus very local. People attended many events and services from Sunday morning and evening to Wednesday nights, as well. During this period people were expected to wear their “Sunday best”, a church was expected to have a Fellowship Hall and a Christian Education wing. Perhaps most importantly, a church building was supposed to look like a church building.

This is supremely the reality with Colonial.

Your physical facility is gorgeous, spacious, welcoming, inviting. It is also based on a distinctively Christendom-centric model.

When you glance to your right in the main entranceway you are reminded by a plaque that the building is based on a New England “meeting house” model, when the Christian faith was front and center in every aspect of the life of the people.

You see features of the meeting house model throughout – “gathering rooms”, spacious New England style hearth/fireplaces, even a covered bridge that originally led to nothing but woods, but was designed to be deeply symbolic.

And even your name – “Colonial”. Minnesota is a delightful state but far from the original thirteen colonies!

It all hearkens to a simpler time – when the Christian church was positioned in the Village Green, in the very center of the life of the New England community. It is an odd juxtaposition on the plains of Minnesota.

But you have a rich heritage that you must not forego – the idea of the church being the center of its community is part of your code. We heard this wistfulness in Focus Groups and saw intimations of it in the open-ended comments on the TCI. There was a time – nearly forty years ago – when Christendom reigned (even in Minnesota) and by simply doing a great job of the rituals and symbols of Christianity (and aligning those with the rituals and symbols of the American founding) Colonial could not help but thrive.

Combine that with some key staff and pastors who were remarkably skilled at connecting people and building community and you had a juggernaut of ministry.

The difficulty is that your community has changed greatly. We no longer live in the society of Christendom.

There were some basic assumptions with regard to ministry in Christendom:

1. Ministry mostly happens at the church building and the footprint of the church building is both evocative and vital.
2. A professional clergy does most of the ministering
3. The Pastor’s job was strikingly similar to a Private Chaplain who provided “pastoral care” during times of difficulty and crisis
4. Discipleship was for children
5. Missions/Evangelism were primarily done overseas with unreached people groups

This was mitigated to a large degree by your Congregational heritage, which put ministry in the hands of the laity. And by the fact that historically you have had a passionate concern for your community (going all the way back to Vietnam-era youth hangouts and extending to Innove).

But, the fact is that the clergy were ever and always the pace-setters and permission-givers.

Things have changed since June 6, 1946. Dr. Clark Cowden sums up those changes: "At the start of the twenty-first century, the church in North America finds itself in a very different place than it used to be. Fifty years ago, the church enjoyed a privileged place in our culture. Many people went to church. The social pressure encouraged 'good' people to belong to a church. People respected the church. The culture listened to the church. Politicians and government officials wanted the church on their side. The church was very much at the center of public life. Church life was booming. That world no longer exists.

It has been said that the 'church that is married to the culture of one age, becomes the widow of the culture in the next age.' We have seen that maxim come true. The church that was so effective in ministering to the 'Christendom culture' in North America fifty years ago, today finds itself struggling to relate to the culture, now that the sands have shifted. The church has been moved to the sidelines of public life, and many are openly wondering about the future viability of the church we love so much. The church is like Rip Van Winkle waking up from a twenty year nap. We are living in the same country, but it is a completely different world. We don't recognize it, and we're not sure what to do about it."

Christendom assumed that people would return week after week and that children of members would remain in church.

This aspiration was a clarion call from your members during our Focus Groups. The reality is that Christendom, as a way of thinking about church, is no longer a viable option. Our research, from the TCI, shows that the least healthy churches tend to score high on Buildings, Finances, and Implementation while the healthiest churches tend to score high on Vision, Worship, and Outreach. Most of Colonial's highest scores were related to Buildings and Finances, while your lowest scores tended to be in Vision and Outreach, among others.

Because Christendom no longer worked in most corners of American culture, many churches over the past 40 years have sought a different strategy.

Attractional

Some of the best-known churches in the country, like Saddleback Church and Willow Creek, came to the forefront in the 1970s and 1980s. The leaders of those churches knew that the Boomer generation had "left the [church] building." Boomers had come of age during the sexual revolution, the growth of rock and roll and an unpopular war in

Vietnam. Among others, these cultural factors molded a generation that was anti-institutional and rebellious towards power. It is no surprise that the informal “come as you are” approach of Attractional churches was popular with Boomers who had left the mainline denomination.

At TAG we refer to this time as the Broadcast Era: a time when people came to watch more than participate. New contemporary services with the intent of being “seeker-friendly” were created. The primary focus of evangelism was to encourage the member/believer to get to know an unbeliever and invite them to a worship service. Worship Centers were built with stadium seating where people would feel comfortable in a passive role—watching the professionals do their job—perhaps even unintentionally, discouraging active participation. The Attractional model created during the Broadcast Era is based on a need to connect with the prevailing culture by providing fun and entertaining activities, clean, attractive and useful facilities, cool youth and children’s ministries and cutting-edge technology. A great coffee-bar to get a Venti Iced Skinny Hazelnut Macchiato, Sugar-Free Syrup, Extra Shot, Light Ice, No Whip is an added bonus.

Many people at Colonial described this as the “Entertainment” model. There was a combined wistfulness and gentle resentment that other local churches were providing this while Colonial seemed not to be able.

As you can see the Broadcast Era and Attractional model took on the task of creating something for everyone. In this model individuals and organizations looked for ways to get more and more of a good thing. The next performance must outdo the last. This year’s Christmas program has to have more people in attendance. Ultimately, influenced by the Broadcast Era, the Attractional model created a ‘bigger is better’ culture. While there is nothing inherently wrong with these ideas, there are typically unintended consequences: namely, the encouragement of a consumeristic mentality.

While there are still vibrant and growing churches using this model, it seems to have plateaued over the past 10-15 years. Of particular note is that an astounding level of importance is placed on the senior pastor. In fact, success often rests on their personality and force of will. Which begs the question: what happens when they leave? Finally, similar to the Christendom model, the success of the Attractional model is predicated on bringing people *to* the church building. So, what do we do when people are reticent to come to a church building?

Missional

Recorded in the 21st Chapter of the Gospel of John are these words: “As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.” Scripture seems clear that God is one who sends. Jesus was sent to serve, not be served (Matthew 20). He left the throne room of Heaven, humbling himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross (Phil. 2).

Consider the gap between these two statements, but from Colonial’s “Outreach” facet on the TCI:

“Our church has a reputation as a “good citizen” in our community”. 41st percentile (4% negative)

“I have been encouraged by this church to reach out to my neighbors”. 2nd percentile (37% negative)

The first statement reflects the historical place that Colonial has had in the community; the second statement reflects the lack of a missional mindset.

In a missional church community, the onus is on the member to “go” and not on the unaffiliated to “come.” Given that, the responsibilities of church leaders are different. The emphasis needs to be on equipping the laity so that they can have a missionary encounter with those in the surrounding culture. Those encounters can happen any time, any day—not just Sundays at 10am.

In his book, *Shaped by God’s Heart*, Milfred Minatrea writes, “A missional church is a reproducing community of authentic disciples being equipped as missionaries sent by God, to live and proclaim His Kingdom in their world.” If this is true, then congregants need to continually grow in passion and love for those who do not know the Lord. Further, congregants need to be equipped to live out Kingdom values and to “do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with [their] God” in their place of work and recreation.

To be clear: a missional community does not mean unattractive. A nice, clean and functional building can be a great asset to a church’s mission. An iconic and attractive building like Colonial’s can attract new folks, especially those looking for stability in a rapidly shifting world. A great youth program with leaders that are caring and fun to be around can have a major transformational impact on kids. Further, great music and teaching is a huge blessing to those who are in the church. But, to be missional, a

church must equip its members to live out said mission whether they are on church property or not.

A Way Forward All mainline denominations were formed during Christendom and thus reflect the institutional structures of Christendom. Most churches from those denominations have hoped for a return to Christendom. Among Congregationalists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Methodists, each of those denominations have lost at least 50% of their members over the last 50 years.

Colonial has operated primarily from a Christendom paradigm throughout its history. This assessment is complicated by the fact that the church has also been highly willing to innovate. These traits often do not go together, but they do in your case.

Part of the Christendom model that has held full sway at Colonial is the idea that churches are best expressed when they are “gathered”. That is, the most genuine expression of the Christian faith is when they people are together to worship in a beautiful and appropriate space and are – at that time – empowered to minister in appropriate fields of service.

Perhaps a way forward is thinking more in terms of a “distributed” than a “gathered” model. This model believes explicitly that the ministry that changes the world takes place in the places where people in the world are – workplaces, homes, communities, social affiliations, recreation fields. This is not to minimize the church gathered but rather to shift and emphasis and focus from “how can we get more people here and have in our space the lynchpin of the community?” to “how can we empower and resource and inspire and encourage our people to leave our meeting place to where the real field of ministry lives and moves and has its being?”.

We believe it is important for Colonial to move increasingly to a missional model, a way of understanding itself and its mission already incarnated in the Innove mission and in its robust local outreach as well as Daniel Harrell’s efforts to blend Christian teaching with the best and most relevant insights from the modern world, from science to philosophy, from gardening to cooking.

Through the process of Discovery and Visioning it will be important for the church’s stakeholders to have authentic conversations about hopes, disappointments and fears

in regard to the church's successes and failures. Additionally, it will be imperative to discover its "code" (an organization's uniqueness, its DNA) so that it can preserve the core while stimulating much needed progress for the future.

Of particular concern to the TAG consultants working with the church is a sense by some that Colonial should try to recapture the glory days of the past, particularly those of the tenure of Arthur Rouner. We heard this, in particular, from the longer-term members. It will be tempting to go back to the familiar, comfortable Christendom approach that has contributed to the church's decline over the past few decades.

The Missional challenge for Colonial is not "How do we recapture the glory days of the Rouner tenure when we were booming, the place to be, and a force in our community?". On the other hand it is not, "How do we adjust to the decline of the mainline church with diminished expectations?"

Rather it is "How are we creatively faithful to the Gospel in Edina and environs today while still being faithful to our code and uniqueness?"

And here is another critical shift: moving from "Who makes decisions?" (i.e. staff versus Council; older generation versus new) to "Who makes disciples?"

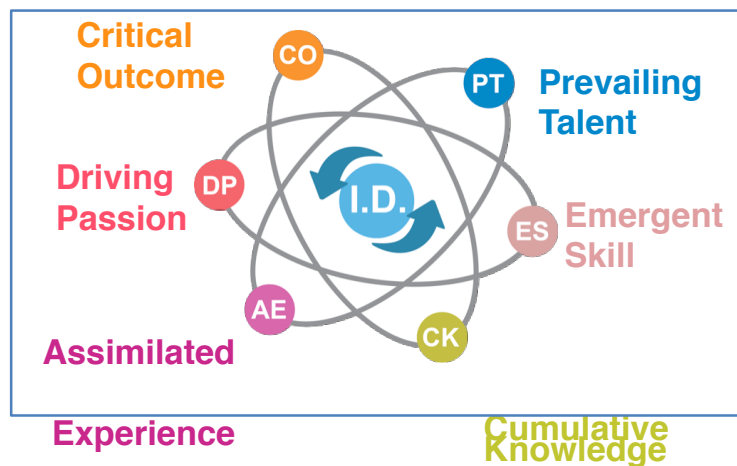
These are real tensions and reflect real competing values, but articulating a clear focus in the face of this tension – a passionate focus that unites all generations in the church – is the key to your effectiveness ongoing.

3.0 Prevailing Talents Team Profile

A Strengths-Based Approach

At TAG, we talk about each person's Intentional Difference, or ID, as having six dimensions (see ID graphic). At the core of a person's ID are their Prevailing

Talents. Core talents are those recurring patterns of thought, feeling and behavior that are determined by the basic 'hard-wiring' of the brain. While there are many ways of determining a person's Prevailing Talents, TAG prefers discovering them through a combination of the Clifton StrengthsFinder and CoreClarity®. The CoreClarity® process provides a disciplined approach to identifying and understanding an individual's core talents and how those innate competencies affect daily decisions, career choices, learning preferences and motivations, as well as how they drive personal and professional relationships.



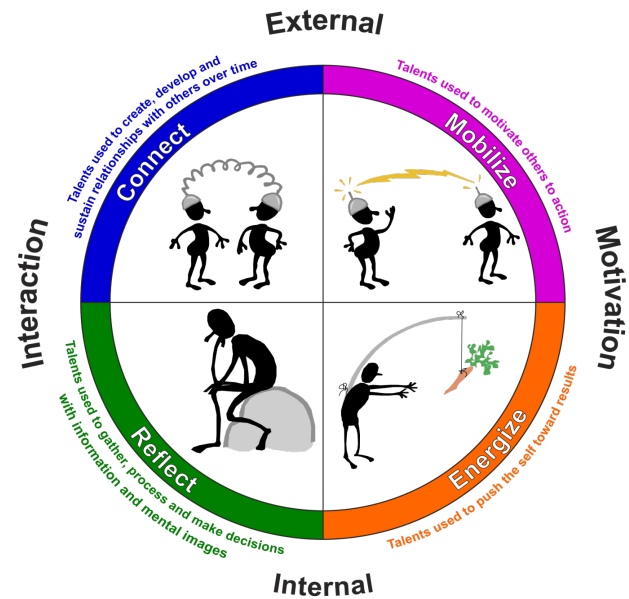
At the group level – whether a leadership team, elders, deacons or church team – the collective strengths of the individuals determine the potential advantage of the group as a whole. The CoreClarity process shows you how to tap into this powerful, yet often latent, reserve of talent.

Our process:

- Identifies and defines the talents of others to help maximize their potential
- Increases the ability to understand and manage interpersonal relationships and the dynamics of the group
- Maps a group's strengths based on the innate potential of the collective group
- Raises productivity and improves performance by increasing the levels of engagement, whether with pastors, lay leaders or professional staff

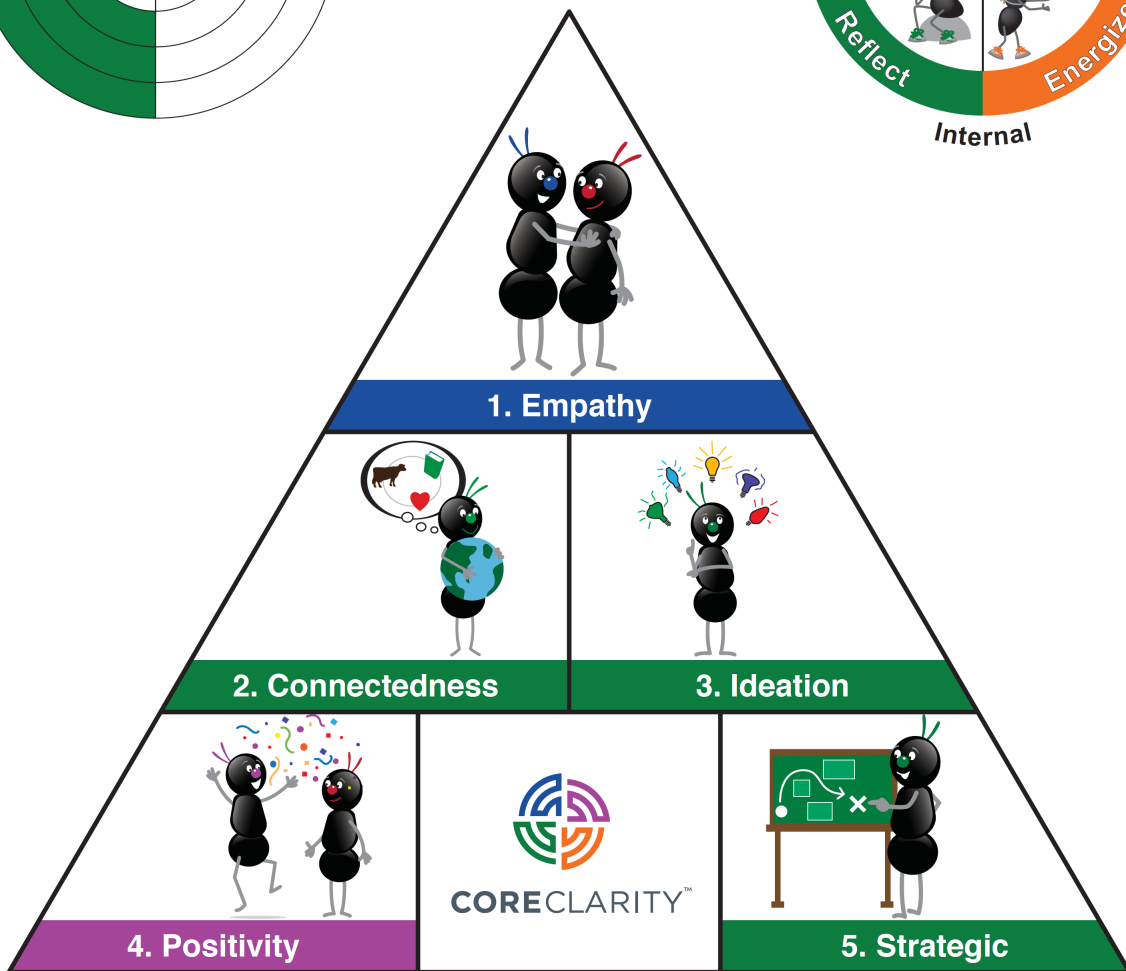
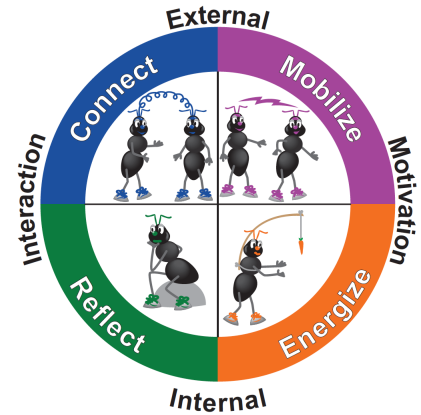
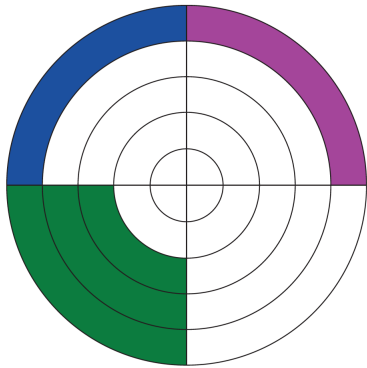
The Clifton StrengthsFinder® identifies 34 talent themes for each individual and ranks them from 1-34. Most people receive their top 5. CoreClarity® then analyzes the individuals and groups using a "key":

- Blue talents are “connect” talents. Interaction is with people and the talents are “external”.
- Green talents are “reflect” talents. Interaction is with data and the talents are internal in nature.
- Orange talents are “energize”. Motivation is about getting things done, and it comes from within.
- Magenta talents are “mobilize” talents – all about mobilizing others. Motivation comes from external sources, not internal sources.



The following is an overview of the leaders from your church who participated in the Prevailing Talents assessment. A more detailed description can be provided upon request.

Colonial Church Staff



4.0 Basic Context (Information Provided by the Church)

Senior Minister Statement: Daniel Harrell, Colonial Church, September 2017

My pastoral passion encompasses a communitarian ideal whereby the “body of Christ” is not reserved as symbolic metaphor but proclaimed as an earthly reality based upon the love of Christ practiced within the church and the world. I am passionate about the imaginative teaching, preaching and living out of Scripture in the context of such a community whereby Christians are called and reminded of God’s vision for human life; a life of forgiveness and grace (both received and extended), of concern for the poor, of hope and promise amidst pain and trouble, and of sanctuary and peace amidst conflict and strife, and hope for a real and certain future. The church models this life, drawing energy from its trajectory toward ultimate consummation into Trinitarian life as the eternal community of God.

I’ve taken to asking our congregation how many churches there are in the Twin Cities, and then reminding them that the answer is *one*. Thus the role of any particular body of Christ is to do their part as the whole, larger Church, trusting and advocating for other local churches to their part in this greater calling we have as followers of Christ. Any one church needs not be all things for all people, nor does it need to compete with other congregations. The challenge is to discover our particular calling and giftedness and then do that.

In this vein I like to use the image of a simmering pot of bolognese sauce. Delicious bolognese requires quality ingredients, time, heat, letting off steam and reduction for the sake of flavor. (I actually preached this while cooking a pot of sauce in worship). In a day when numerical, programatic, financial or facility expansion are chief measures of success, to able to point to the power of concentration, focus and intensity seems important.

I do think that unlike business models, a church’s goal is faithfulness to Christ which is not always easily measured. Indeed, failure and loss are part of our cruciform nature as churches. The history of the church, and of any particular church, rides its waves of faithfulness and failure, crests of success but also deeper, stormy waters where loss reveals our true character. At the same time, faithfulness does bear observable fruit: therefore I anticipate that our success should be measured by our growth in faith and

love and service to each other and the world as well as its increase in stewardship and depth of community. My goal for Colonial continues to be a better church, not necessarily a bigger church.

The difference between a good church and a bad church is pretty much up to the congregation. We can be a terrible church by trading Scripture for feel-better sermons, insist we still care but then never show up, saying we love but never tolerate being loved, insisting on our own ways instead of the way of the Lord. Or we can be a good church— learning and loving, getting into each other’s business, breaking bread and being broken, praying and submitting ourselves to God and each other. These are not ideals. We can do this.

At the same time, the difference between a good church and *great* church is *not* up to the congregation at all. “Day by day,” we read in the book of Acts, “*the Lord added to their number those being saved.*” I often make the comparison to surfers who stay in shape and eat right and hone their boards, even though they spend most of their time paddling and waiting and watching. If and when the big wave comes, and the Spirit blows, they are ready to ride. A bad church is the slacker who thinks he can just float on any piece of fiberglass with a beer and be done. And as long as the seas are calm, you can’t tell any difference. But when the big wave hits with all its terror and glory, then the difference is clear. A big wave makes a good church look great.

A Brief History of Colonial Church of Edina

Colonial Church began as a start-up sponsored by a local Congregational association that targeted Edina, Minnesota, a then fast growing and upscale suburb of Minneapolis, for a new church community. The founders called the church “Colonial” because they desired a community church based on the ideals of the first Christian settlers in New England.

1946 to 1961

Colonial’s first pastor was Kenneth Seim. There were 57 charter members and 87 attended the first worship service on March 31, 1946. Initially, worship services were held in the gymnasium of an Edina school. Also in 1946, property for a church building was purchased.

By 1949, when the new church building was dedicated, membership had grown to 309. Growth continued, and, after two separate additions to the original church building in 1952 and 1957, membership exceeded 1000.

From 1958 to 1961 Colonial was affected by controversy among Congregational churches in the US. In 1958 the church voted against joining the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches (NACCC). In 1960, Colonial members, by a 2/3rds majority voted against joining the merger of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the General Council of Congregational Christian Churches to form the United Church of Christ. In that same year, Kenneth Seim resigned.

1962 to 1994

Arthur Rouner was called as Colonial’s second pastor, beginning his period of service on September 1, 1962. Young (33), energetic and with an engaging personality, and author of “The Congregational Way of Life” which won an award from the NACCC, he led the church into a period of further, substantial growth in membership and programs, an impact that extended beyond the church itself to the Edina community and the larger world. The following are selected as illustrative of this growth and impact.

- From 1962 to 1967 membership increased from over 1000 to over 2000.
- In 1969 three morning worship services became necessary, and in this year Colonial combined with a nearby Catholic church to conduct Vacation Bible School.
- In 1970, Arthur Rouner and another Colonial pastor presented “Devilish Dialogues”, Lenten services on a local TV station.
- In 1972, Outreach activities included a junior high drop-in center, support for Native Americans, clinics in China and Mexico and two hospitals in Vietnam.

- In 1974, with membership over 2400, and as a capital drive to raise funds for a new building was starting, Colonial held a re-enactment (the “Not So Midnight Ride of Paul Revere”) to kick off America’s bicentennial.
- Building of a new Colonial campus began in 1977 and was completed in January 1979. The new “Colonial Village” facility won the highest architectural award from the American Institute of Architects and was featured in US News and World Report.
- 1982 was notable for several reasons. Starting this year, 1982 Colonial began an ever growing commitment to meeting human needs in East Africa. And, in 1982, the church joined both the UCC and the NACCC and its ministerial staff numbered 11, five ordained ministers and six lay people.
- In 1986 a capital campaign to raise \$4 million for a major expansion of the new facility started. In this year, a Colonial counseling center was expanded to support more staff, the primary choir had over 140 registered singers, and a TV program for network television was launched.
- In 1987, three teams from Colonial visited Africa, Jimmy Carter preached at the church and membership reached 3700.
- The new addition to the Colonial campus was completed in 1988 and more people than ever were involved in Gathering Groups and Sunday School.
- In 1989 four teams journeyed to Africa and the Pilgrim Way Bookshop opened.

Beginning in about 1992 a number of the church’s members began to question Arthur Rouner’s leadership. He believed the Holy Spirit was calling him to lead Colonial towards an expanded TV ministry and greater commitment to physical as well as spiritual needs in Africa. But these passions were not shared by a substantial and influential part of the Colonial community, and they believed he should focus on other priorities. The potential that this disagreement could split the church was recognized and, ultimately, Rouner resigned during Lent in 1993, but continued as Senior Minister until September 1994. Rouner’s resignation may have averted a break-up of Colonial, but the spirit in the church was wounded by the depth of the controversy. Giving, attendance and membership trended downward, and staffing reductions became necessary.

Though the circumstances leading to Rouner’s resignation were tragic, part of his legacy was a strong tradition of lay involvement which provided momentum while Colonial was led by an interim minister, John Cionca, and a search for a new pastor was conducted. For example, in April 1995, 56 people were elected to positions on the Church Council and twelve Boards: Adult Education, Children’s Education, Counseling, Deacons, Evangelism/Communications, Foundation, Mission, Music & Arts, Outreach, Trustees, Women’s Ministry, and Youth.

1996 to 2004.

Colonial's third Senior Minister, David Fisher, began his service in late 1995, leaving his position as Senior Minister of historic Park Street Church in Boston. 1996, Fisher's first full year, was Colonial's Jubilee year, and one of the ways Colonial celebrated its Jubilee year was by launching a major capital campaign which enabled Colonial to pay down most of the debt incurred in the 1986 expansion of its facilities. Another important milestone during Fisher's service was a Service of Reconciliation held in 2000 to restore fellowship between Colonial and Arthur Rouser.

Fisher's time at Colonial brought stability and facilitated some healing. The leadership structure and programs that existed when Rouser resigned continued under Fisher without any significant change. Fisher was greatly appreciated for his eloquent sermons. However, unlike Rouser, he was not highly relational, which dampened his effectiveness. From 1995 to late 2004, when Fisher resigned, membership declined 20% to about 2400, average attendance declined slightly, though giving improved somewhat in the latter years he was at Colonial.

2005 -2010

Following David Fisher's departure, an interim minister, Richard Nye, led the church during the search for a new Senior Minister. As preparation for this important search, extensive input was sought by the Search Committee through numerous Listening Sessions in which 120 participants helped to clarify the core values, distinctive gifts, and hopes and priorities of the congregation. A summary of the findings was presented to the congregation and is available.

The new Senior Minister, John Westfall, was installed in late 2005. Although embraced by the congregation initially, and praised for his energy and engaging sermons, his leadership approach and impact began to raise significant concerns. In a painful process that included many attempts to constructively address these concerns with the pastor, the Church Council concluded that he was not a good fit for Colonial and put the matter to a congregational vote. His service ended with his resignation in 2007. Unfortunately, because of the need for confidentiality in sensitive personnel matters, this resulted in another spate of broken relationships and departures, as some members felt that the process was too secretive and too much control was exercised by lay leaders. By God's grace, another excellent Interim Senior Minister, Jack Fortin, was hired who devoted himself to bringing healing and reconciliation.

In spite of turnover in the role of Senior Minister, the commitment of those in leadership remained strong. The twelve Boards and Committees that existed in 1995 were still functioning more than 20 years later and a strategic plan was developed by the leadership to guide the work of the church. The long-standing tradition of retaining a

strong Teaching Minister, which started under Seim's leadership, was still a distinctive feature of the congregation's deep commitment to education and spiritual formation until 2010, when the last minister to hold that post, Gary Klingsporn, left Colonial to lead a small church in New England.

Nevertheless, what happened during the years immediately preceding 2010 led to misunderstanding, discouragement and broken relationships, and this took its toll on the church. Membership declined from about 2400 in 2004 to "active membership" of about 1000 in 2010, average attendance declined from 754 in 2004 to 488 in 2010. Giving also declined during this same period from approximately \$2 million to about \$1.75 million in 2010.

2010 to Present

Recognizing the importance and difficulty of finding a good fit for Colonial, a ministerial search firm was retained to aid in the search for the next senior minister. Daniel Harrell became Colonial's fifth Senior Minister in June 2010, bringing new ideas and new energy to Colonial. Under his leadership many standing committees were eliminated and task forces were introduced to allow for focused ministry involvement and provide more opportunities for congregational engagement. Within less than a year after Harrell arrived, the church sold a significant parcel of largely unused land to the developer of a senior living center. Under the terms of the sale, Colonial received \$1.85 million in cash plus a 30% interest in the senior living center called "The Waters."

Most of the cash received from Colonial's land sale was applied to long overdue repairs and preventative maintenance, repayment of approximately \$500,000 in debt, and adding funds to assets held by the Church's affiliated foundation. At Harrell's initiative, and to stimulate new thinking and new approaches to outreach, approximately \$350,000 was dedicated to funding a competition to sponsor and fund Kingdom-building ideas by young social entrepreneurs. "Innové" was the name assigned to this competition among social entrepreneurs and it was a great success for at least two reasons. First, it ultimately funded 11 early stage social entrepreneurs in two rounds ending in May 2013 and May 2015 (that are continuing to do their important work today); and, second, it engaged both the minds and hearts of about 150 members of the church community to use their skills and talents from their "day jobs" to mentor these young leaders and help them build the Kingdom. More information about Innové is in a separate piece supplied by Daniel.

In 2015, under Harrell's leadership, Colonial invited a church community called Upper Room into a collaborative partnership with Colonial. Upper Room was losing its access to facilities at another location and wrote to more than 25 churches seeking the opportunity to share their space. Only Colonial responded and, after much deliberation and prayer, it offered much more than access to space. The collaborative partnership includes regular staff interface, mutual ministry and support, promotion of the other church's programs, occasional joint educational initiatives and other opportunities to bring the two communities together.

In 2016, the congregation marked its 70th anniversary with a community celebration. A highlight of the year was the creation and distribution of a book titled *A Legacy of Love* in which inspiring life stories and faith journeys were lovingly gathered through interviews of 150 long time members who were over 70 years of age.

While Innové and the collaboration with Upper Room are perhaps the most notable initiatives in the last seven years, the Colonial community was also stimulated in other “out-of-the-box” ways, including through creative approaches to sermons by Daniel, and bringing in outside speakers who addressed the intersections of faith and science and faith and politics. At the same time, core programs of the church—e.g., children, youth and adult ministries, music, pastoral care, missions—continued to fulfill their respective roles.

Also notable during the last 5 years, however, has been the loss of several key staff members, including the Minister to Children and Families, Director of Youth Ministries, Minister of Congregational Life, Minister of Mission and Outreach, and Director of Finance and Operations, and the fraying of emotional bonds that inevitably results from such changes. In response to some key gaps in administrative and leadership roles, as well as concerns over plans for coverage during Daniel’s 3-month sabbatical in the winter of 2016, an Organization Audit was conducted by the Church Moderator, and recommendations were made to the ministerial leadership team and the Church Council. Despite staff turnover and tightening of budgets, the congregation has been encouraged by the addition of capable and creative new leaders in the persons of Marie Wonders, Minister for Children and Families, and Carter Sample, Minister of Student and Missional Engagement, as well as the long-standing and loving ministry of Jeff Lindsay, the Associate Minister of Pastoral Care and Seniors.

The tag line for Colonial Church for decades has been: *A Place to Grow in Christ and Serve the World*. But a meaningful debate about each of the elements of this statement has been brewing among members:

- **Place**—How should we care for our beautiful but costly building and grounds, and how we might cover the expense of continuing repairs and improvements?
- **Grow**—What does growth look like and mean for Colonial? Are our declining numbers a sign that we need to appeal to and reach out to add to our company those who will join us in following Christ, or is it a sign of being refined and reduced by Christ to grow deeper in his love and service?
- **Serve**—Colonial has had a long tradition of service to the community and to world missions. A great many of the members contribute to significant ministries outside the official auspices of Colonial Church. Should these ministries be embraced and celebrated in some way? Should the core missions and ministries of the church be redefined and redirected in new ways?

In late 2016, the church sold its 30% interest in the Waters facility it acquired in 2010, which generated net proceeds of about \$4.5 million. Along with other realities—both exciting and concerning—that were present as Colonial entered 2017, this extraordinary windfall was part of the impetus for Colonial’s Church Council to launch an all-church discernment process called “ReForming –What is God Calling Us to Next?”

Listing of Programs, Services, and Ministries at Colonial Church

Programs

FaithTrek-Children's Ministry K-5 (Sunday and Wednesday Programs)
Stepping Stones-Children's Ministry 2-Pre-K (Sunday Programs)
Crash/Current-Youth Ministry Grades 6-12
Wednesday Night Live Dinners
Adult Education: Bible Studies/Classes
Confirmation Classes
Men/Women Retreats
Chorale

Services

Pastoral Care
 Acts of Love
 Prayer Chain
 Memorials/Weddings
 Deacon Visits
 One on One

Ministries

Upper Room Partnership
Colonial Gardens: Gardens on the property for food shelf donation
Bee Hives for Honey
Prison Ministry
Families Moving Forward
Refugee Ministry
Sheridan Story Ministry
Centering Prayer

Synopsis of Creative Ministry Program, Colonial Church

Daniel Harrell

As fortune came to pass, our church sold a piece of land for the tidy sum of two million dollars. Most of the proceeds went to retire a sizable debt and repair an expensive building, but our congregation also knew that to spend the entire sale proceeds solely on ourselves was unfaithful. So we voted to allocate twenty percent to serving others outside our walls. The sensible way to spend this allocation would have been to find a successful service agency with a proven track record and write them the check. But I hated that idea. Surely we could leverage this money for a bigger impact that would allow us to get personally involved too.

So we developed a social entrepreneurial competition and invited idea-makers, 35-years-old and younger, to submit project proposals to "change the world" with gospel values of grace, justice, love, redemption and reconciliation. Our church provided funding and coaching, networking, creative community, and acceleration toward successful project launches. We used business acumen to build sustainability in the projects and stress measurable outputs and outcomes. We moved past donor-based models that rely on constant fund-raising to self-sustainable models. It would be a different way of doing mission.

We named our initiative **Innové**, a French participle (that sounded evocative) meaning "breaking new ground." We designed a process to maximize the skills of our business-minded congregation--from technology, marketing, assessment, and coaching to advising, planning, training, budgeting, execution and evaluation. More than 150 members of our body volunteered their talents. We worried that after marshaling this wealth of resources we would fail to attract young entrepreneurial applicants. But in the end, almost 250 applicants became engaged over two rounds Innové where ultimately \$500K was awarded to 11 projects, several of which became mission partners of our congregation. Moreover, we've since seen our former mission pastor takes these practices and launch Innové Studios, an initiative deigned to help other churches with similar entrepreneurial endeavors. We're looking to launch a third round for high school students.

Innové beautifully brought together a vast array of amazing gifts that comprised our body—human resources people, arts people, social services people, accountants, lawyers, managers, executives, marketers, technologists, organizational developers, and more—all finally getting to use what they did best for the sake of God’s work in the world. One church member (a previously doubting church leader no less) called Innové one of the most meaningful things he had ever done. Others described how rewarding it had been to use gifts for the Lord that they use every day at work but had never found a place for in church. Everybody remarked how wonderful it had been to come alongside people passionate about serving the world as Christians, and likewise how doing mission outside our church walls caused so many good things inside our walls.

For an expanded write up, you can read the CT article, [“Yes You Can Serve God and Money”](#) (though I wasn't crazy about that title.)

Summary of Worship Attendance for the Past 5 Years

Summer months are lower in attendance. The first number listed is the average attendance for the year. The second number is the average attendance for just the program year September-May.

2016-17:	424 & 468
2015-16:	460 & 497
2014-15:	513 & 559
2013-14:	527 & 576
2012-13:	504 & 540

Age Demographics for Members/Attenders of Colonial

20's = 120

(Many of these 20's are students who were confirmed and became a member through confirmation. They are in our system but most do not attend on a regular basis.)

30's = 66

40's = 23

50's = 135

60's = 246

70's = 242

80's = 126

90's = 29

No age on file = 438

Total = 1562

Age demographics, type = member or attender (not child or visitor)

5.0 Demographic Report Executive Summary

Introduction from TAG

Colonial Church has asked TAG Consulting to conduct a demographic study as part of a comprehensive strategic planning project. TAG purchased a research report from Percept, Inc. based on a seven mile radius of the area surrounding the church. Please refer to the maps for the specific parameters of the area. The data comes from the US Census Bureau's most recent data, Claritas (the top market research firm in the country), the WEFA Group, and Percept's own studies.

This report provides only the most significant highlights from the Percept data. It is intended to raise the issues that are most pertinent to the planning process. It is not intended to be an in-depth market research analysis, but rather a strategic overview of the community as it relates to the ministry's strategic possibilities. Please refer to the full Percept study and the accompanying Source Book if you need more detail.

Executive Summary

Colonial Church is located at 6200 Colonial Way in Edina. The area studied has a population of 492,173 and is projected to grow at a rate slightly higher than the national average by 2020. This is interesting in light of the fact that since the last census the area's growth rate has been less than the national average.

Anglos are by far the highest represented population group at 74.4%; however the area is very high in the number of total ethnic groups represented. While the percentage of the population that is Anglo is projected to decrease slightly in the next five years, there is a projected increase in the Asian population. The average income in the area is \$104,820, compared to the national average of \$80,853.

The demographic data paints a picture of an area that identifies with traditional church affiliation (especially Catholic and Lutheran) to a greater than average extent but does not necessarily see this faith significantly impacting day to day life. While the area is above the average in terms of charitable giving in general it is on par with the rest of the

nation in giving to churches. This would suggest an untapped giving potential in the study area for churches. To a significantly greater degree than average the area is represented by households headed by an unmarried male or female. There is also a greater than average rate of never married adults who call the study area home.

The percentage of those who have a college or graduate degree is strikingly high – in general, the study area can be described as highly educated.

Survivors are the largest percentage of the population and Millennials and Boomers are second and third respectively. Two trends to watch – members of Generation Z are at 18.8% now but are expected in the near term to increase to 24.2% of the population, which will put them in a dead heat with Survivors as the largest group in the next few years.

Based on the research, Colonial Church may want to consider the following recommendations in the evaluation process for its present and potential ministries:

Population:

Between 2017 and 2022, the population is projected to increase by 4.1% or 20,387 additional persons. During the same period, the U.S. population is projected to grow by 3.8%. The average age is 40 years of age and is projected to increase to 40.8, very slightly higher than the national average. Average income in the area is \$104,820, which is significantly higher than the national average of \$80,853.

Ethnicity:

The number of ethnic groups represented in the study is very high by national standards, although Anglos dominate with 74.4 percent of the population as opposed to all other ethnicities (25.6%). African-Americans are the second largest represented ethnicity and the Asian population is expected to be the fastest growing cohort between now and 2022, with an increase of 16.2 percent. The Hispanic-Latino population is significantly below the national average.

Generational Grouping:

27.7 percent of the population falls into the Survivor cohort, which is aged 36-56. Millennials (born 1982-2001) are the second largest grouping, with 27.4%. Baby Boomers have around 19% representation.

Family Structures:

The study area has an overrepresentation of never married adults (36% versus the national average of 33%). The area also has a higher than average number of non-married female and male heads of household. That said, 41.7% of the population fall into the category of married couples.

Education and Employment:

The area of study is well over the average in terms of education with a significantly higher than average rate of high school graduates. Strikingly, those who have a college education are 53.3% of the population, compared to the national rate of 29.6%. The area is blessed with a higher than national average employment rate (69% versus 58.3%) and along with that comes an unemployment rate of 3.7% which is less than the national average of 5.2%

Matters of Faith and Preference:

Residents of the study area report that 22.1% of them have increased their faith involvement in the last ten years, one of the data points which indicates a healthy rate of spiritual receptivity as Colonial Church carries out its mission. In terms of denominational affiliation, two groups are worthy of note as being overrepresented – Catholics (27.3% of the population) and Lutherans (18.7%). These are higher than the national rates of 23.7% and 7.2% respectively.

Contribution Potential:

Due to its significantly higher than average income rate (\$104,820), Colonial can anticipate a robust giving potential from the community. While rates of giving to churches and other religious organizations are on par or slightly higher than the national average, the rate of giving more than \$100 per year to charities in general are very high as compared to the average (44.5% versus 33.7%).

Section One: Demographic Data

Demography is the statistical study of human populations in a given geographic area. The data most often includes population, ethnicity, income, growth rates and other information detailed to the needs of the specific study. The data and the growth rates describe the present characteristics and the likely characteristics moving into the future. These demographic trends are projections based on 5-year projections.

Population






	Study Area 2017	National Average	Study Area Trend (2022)	National Trend (2022)
Population	492,173	NA	Increasing by 4.1%	Increasing By 3.8%
Households	219,437	NA	Increasing by 4.5%	Increasing
Average Household Income	\$104,820	\$80,853	Increasing to \$113,133	Increasing
Average Age	40.0	39.1	Aging to 40.8	Aging to 39.9

Comments/Recommendations: A healthy rate of population growth and substantially above average income rates auger well for Colonial’s growth in the next few years. As your community grows you will want to pay close attention to trends in ethnic populations, with those of Asian origin increasing at a rate well above the national average.


Map: Projected Population Growth

TAG CONSULTING - EDINA, MN 55436
MINISTRY AREA BY BLOCK GROUP

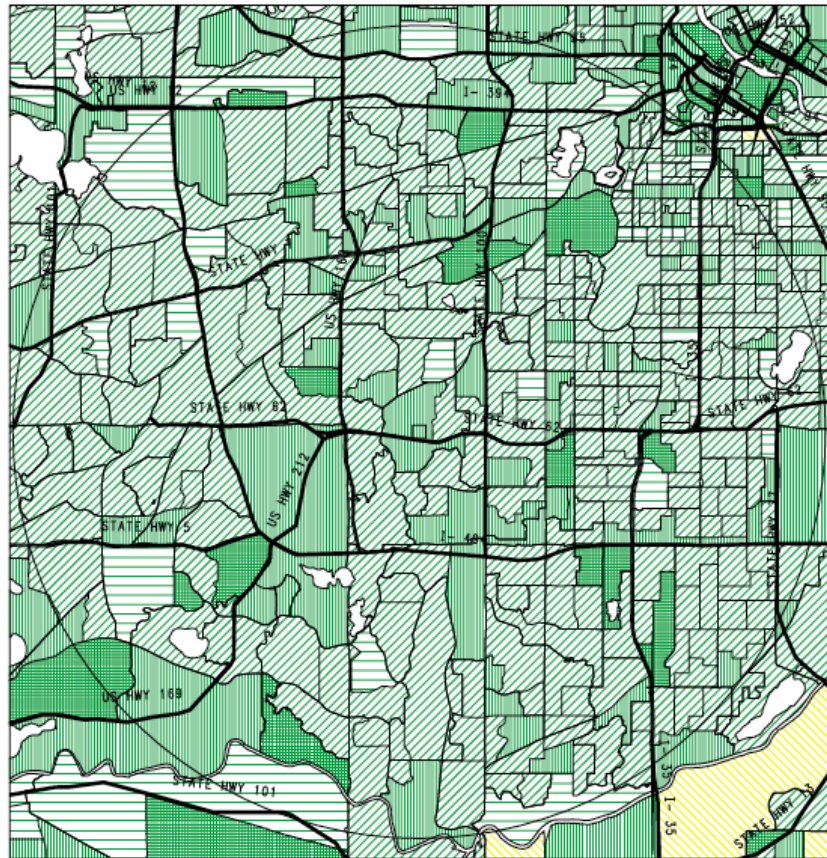
PROJECTED POPULATION
GROWTH PERCENTAGE
BETWEEN 2017 AND 2022

-  -2% to -1%
-  -1% to 1%
-  1% to 5%
-  5% to 10%
-  10% to 14%

National Average: 3.8%

-  Site Location with 7 mile radius
-  Major Highways

Only areas with at least 10 households shown



PerceptGroup Website www.PerceptGroup.com Phone 800.442.6277

281024:281024:9

Map: Average Household Income

TAG CONSULTING - EDINA, MN 55436
MINISTRY AREA BY BLOCK GROUP

ESTIMATED 2017 AVERAGE HOUSEHOLD INCOME

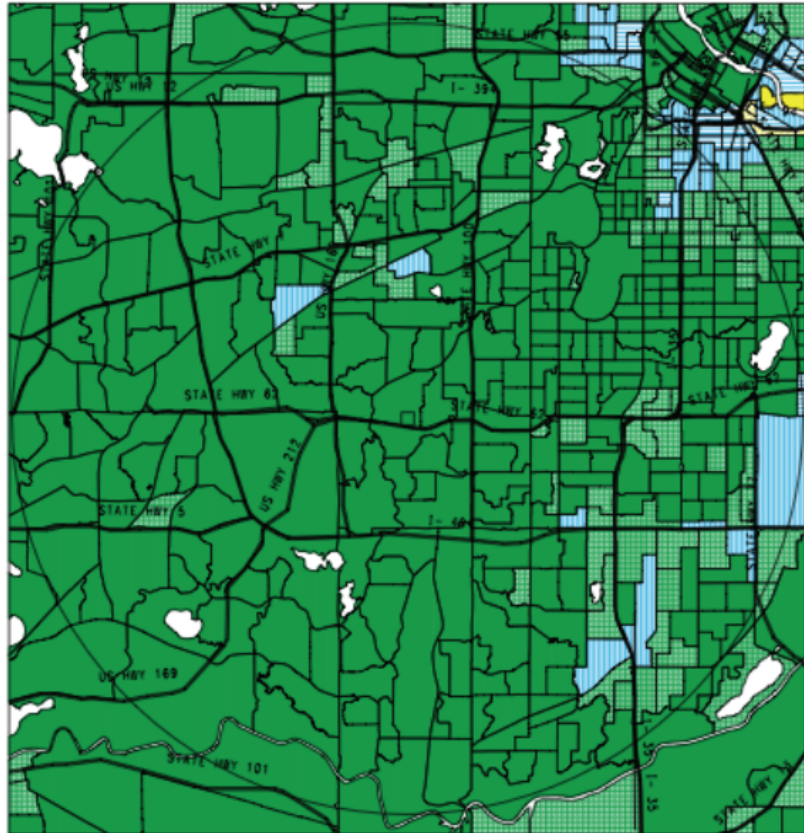
- \$12,500 to \$15,000
- \$15,000 to \$25,000
- \$25,000 to \$35,000
- \$35,000 to \$50,000
- \$50,000 to \$75,000
- \$75,000 to \$255,642

National Average: \$80,853

Site Location with 7 mile radius

Major Highways

Only areas with at least 10 households shown



Ethnicity	Study Area % 2017	Study Area Trend 2021	Study Area Projection % 2022
White	74.4%	Slightly Decreasing	72.8%
Asian-Other	9.5%	Increasing	10.4%
Hispanic-Latino	7.7%	Slightly Increasing	7.9%
African American	8.4%	Slightly Increasing	8.9%

Comments/Recommendations: While Anglos will continue to be by far the largest percent of the population, Colonial should pay attention to the increase in the Asian population and ask what that might mean for outreach and programming.

Generational Grouping	Study Area % of Population 2017	% Above National Average	Study Area % of Population 2022
Survivor Age 34-54	27.7%	2.2%	24.2%
Millennials Age 14-33	27.4%	1.0%	26.9%
Boomers Age 55-72	19.3%	0.0%	17.1%
Generation Z Age 13 and under	18.8%	-6.7%	24.2%
Silents Age 73-90	6.6%	6.8%	4.8%
Builders Age 91 and over	.3%	29.2%	.0%

Comments/Recommendations: Healthy growth in the rate of Survivors in the population means that Colonial will want to consider putting a premium on ministry which touches on areas of concern to mid-career individuals and those who have adolescent children. It is also interesting to note that at present – but (obviously) not in the future the Builder generation is overrepresented.

**Please find Generational Grouping definitions in the Source Book provided.*

Family Structures

	Study Area % 2017	National Average % 2017
Married	48.6%	50.1%
Single	32.7%	33.0%
Divorced or Widowed	10.5%	16.9%
Two Parent Families	41.7%	65.3%
Male or Female Head of Household	46.1%	33.8%

Comments/Recommendations: What is notable here is that the number of households in the study area led by a non-married head of household is significantly higher than the national average. Colonial will surely want to ensure that it is focusing on the very particular needs of these types of families as it provides ministry care and community outreach.

Education	Study Area % 2017	National Average % 2017
High School Degree	94.2%	86.5%
Bachelor's Degree	33.4%	29.6%
Graduate Degree	19.9%	11.2%

Employment

	Study Area % 2017	National Average % 2017
White-Collar Jobs	73.3%	61.4%
Blue-Collar Jobs	26.7%	38.6%
Female Workers	77.3%	66.8%
Female Workers With Children	23.9%	24.6%
Retirement Income	14.3%	17.6%
Unemployed*	3.7%	5.2%

- *Unemployment rates are from the US Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics*

Comments/Recommendations: The picture here is of a highly educated population (note the high rates of those with college education or higher) and an unemployment rate that is less than the national average at present. Combine these figures with the higher than average number of white collar workers, and Colonial will continue to see a large number of professional, highly educated, upwardly mobile workers in its ministry target area.

Faith Involvement Level

	Study Area % 2017	National Average % 2017
Strongly Involved	34%	35.4%
Somewhat Involved	31.7%	29.9%
Not Involved	33%	34.7%

Religion/Church Preference

	Study Area % 2017	National Average % 2017
Catholic	27.3%	23.7%
Baptist	6.7%	16.1%
Methodist	11.1%	10.1%
Lutheran	18.7%	7.2%
Non-Denominational / Independent	5.7%	6.9%
Not Interested and No Preference	10.1%	11.1%

Comments/Recommendations: Lots of people have Catholic and Lutheran backgrounds or affiliation in the target area. This would suggest two things: a familiarity with traditional forms of Christian worship and practice combined – quite possibly – with a certain degree of ‘reaction’ to such forms and an openness to newer styles of worship.






Map: Likelihood of No Faith Involvement

TAG CONSULTING - EDINA, MN 55436
MINISTRY AREA BY BLOCK GROUP

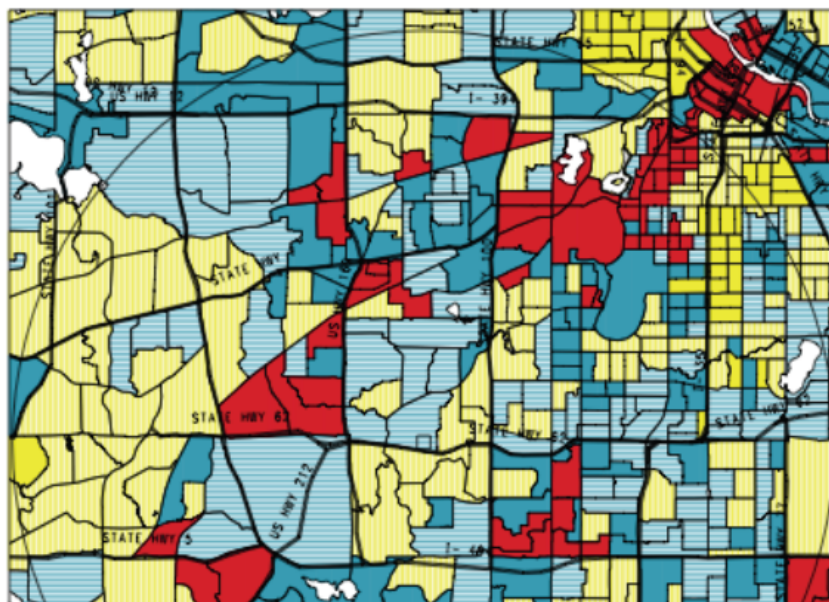


ESTIMATED PERCENTAGE
OF 2017 HOUSEHOLDS WITH
LIKELIHOOD OF

NO FAITH INVOLVEMENT

-  16% to 28%
-  28% to 31%
-  31% to 33%
-  33% to 36%
-  36% to 46%

National Average: 34.7%



Contribution Potential

Average Household Income	Giving to Churches	Giving to Charity	Giving to Colleges
\$104,820	About Average	Well Above Average	Well Above Average

Comments/Recommendations: While giving to churches is about average the fact that the population gives at a significantly higher rate to other charities and educational institutions seems to suggest untapped giving potential for the faith community.

Section Two: Ethographic Information

“Ethos” comes from a Greek word that refers to the essential spirit and fundamental character of a group of people. It reflects the similar beliefs, attitudes and concerns in a given area. This section of the report provides the ethographic information, which in conjunction with the demographic data may be helpful in the planning process. Linking the research to a sophisticated geo-demographic segmentation system (called U.S. Lifestyles) has produced the ethographic information. First and foremost, it is very important to understand that ethos-estimates for a study area are only partially based upon a local survey of that area. The ethos projected in the report for a local study area is based upon the actual distribution of U.S. Lifestyles segments in that area.

The real value of ethographic information is that it creates a picture of a community or region much like an impressionist painting. By analogy, ethographic information tries to accomplish the same end by creating an impression of how a community is likely to look and feel. Ethographic information attempts to provide a useful picture of what is likely to be true in a study area. It is simply saying that, in the absence of extenuating circumstances, this is the ethos we might expect in a typical community populated with the kind of people in the study area.

Lifestyle Segments

The U.S. Census Bureau has designated 50 different Lifestyle Segments. These 50 segments are based upon unique combinations of over 100 demographic, socio-economic and financial variables.

With 31 out of 50 U.S. Lifestyle Segments represented the area has High lifestyle diversity.

The three largest Lifestyle Segments in the Study Area are:

		% of Households In the Study Area	National Average %
1	Educated New Starters	16.5%	2.9%
2	Traditional Affluent Families	13.5%	3.5%
3	Suburban Mid-Life Families	11.3%	5.5%

**Note: The following descriptions pertain to the nation in general, not the study area in particular.*

Description of Educated New Starters:

Almost entirely urban, this segment ranks among the lowest for children age 0 to 17, only slightly above average in median household income and has twice the average number of adults with graduate degrees. The proportion of renter to owner is almost the reverse of the national average, with well over half of housing renter occupied. Music listening habits tend toward classic and adult-oriented rock. Faith involvement is dramatically lower than the national average in every area, as is belief in God. Higher than average are beliefs that a healthy environment has become a national crisis and that the country must open its doors to immigration. Religious affiliations highest above the national average are Judaism, Eastern Religions, New Age, Unitarian/ Universalist or Presbyterian/Reformed. The primary concerns of this group are Companionship, Satisfying Job/Career, Finding Life Direction, Social Injustice and Racial/Ethnic Prejudice. This segment offers strong financial support for charities and educational institutions, but significantly less than average for religious organizations. Asked to

identify programs and characteristics they would prefer in a church, these households are more likely to indicate Cultural Programs, Adult Theological Discussion Groups, Sports/Camping, Marriage Enrichment Opportunities and Daycare Services.

Description of Traditional Affluent Families:

This group represents the wealthiest households in America, with a median household income over three times the national average. The group naturally ranks very high, if not highest, in home ownership, property value, white collar employment, undergraduate and graduate education levels, and number of adults age 40 to 64. Faith involvement is about the same as the national average, though belief in God and belief that God is actively involved in the world both fall substantially below the national average. Religious affiliations highest above the national average are Judaism (ranks number 3 of all the segments), Orthodox, Presbyterian/Reformed (ranks number one), Episcopal (ranks number 2) Unitarian/Universalist and Congregational. The primary concerns of this group are Social Injustice, Aging Parent Care, Time for Recreation/Leisure, Finding Life Direction, Retirement Opportunities and Long-Term Financial Security. These individuals are much more likely than the average person to believe that the United States should open its doors to all peoples, and U.S. Lifestyles Segment Descriptions SourceBook 84 SourceBook U.S. Lifestyles Segment Descriptions 85 significantly less likely to consider the changing racial/ethnic face of America a threat to our national heritage. They also prefer to rely more on themselves and somewhat less on a leader compared with the national average. They rank number one in contributions to religious organizations, number one in contributions to colleges and universities, and number two in contributions to charities. Asked to identify programs and characteristics they would prefer in a church, these households are more likely to indicate Cultural Programs, Active Retirement Programs, Adult Theological Discussion Groups, Intellectual Worship, and Emphasis on Global Mission.

Description of Suburban Mid-Life Families

This group, among the highest in median income, is represented by above average numbers of adults age 35 to 69. The group ranks high in the number of households which receive retirement income, and is above average in every white collar occupation category. Almost all members of this segment own their own home. Faith involvement is at or somewhat below the national average in every category. Religious affiliations

highest above the national average are Congregational, Catholic, Presbyterian/Reformed, Orthodox, New Age and Unitarian/Universalist. The primary concerns of this group are Childcare, Time for Recreation/Leisure, Retirement Opportunities, Parenting Skills and Long-Term Financial Security. The segment ranks above average in contributions to religious organizations, charities and educational institutions. Asked to identify programs and characteristics they would prefer in a church, these households are more likely to indicate Divorce Recovery Programs, Marriage Enrichment Opportunities, Parent Training Programs and Participatory Music.

Expressed Concerns

%

Achieving Long-term Financial Security	56.8
Maintaining Personal Health	48.6
Finding Time For Recreation and Leisure	30.6
Finding A Satisfying Job/Career	27.9
Finding/Providing Health Insurance	27.6
Day to Day Financial Worries	25.1

Key Values

%

“Public education is essential to the future of American society”	94.3
“It is important to preserve the traditional American family structure.”	89.0
“A healthy environment has become a national crisis”	83.3
“The role of Churches/Synagogues is to help form and support moral values”	79.3
“I believe there is a God”	79.1

Church Program Preferences

%

Active Retirement Programs	31.6
Bible Study Discussion and Prayer Groups	31.4
Family Activities and Outings	31.2
Cultural Programs (Music, Drama, Art)	27.1
Adult Theological Discussion Groups	26.6
Youth Social Programs	25.7

Worship Style Preferences

Emotionally Uplifting	Intellectually Challenging	Both
23.8%	14.5%	41.1%

Traditional/Formal/Ceremonial	Contemporary/Informal	Both
24.0%	26.9%	27.9%

Music Style Preferences

Traditional	Contemporary	Both
27.2%	22.8%	30.6%

Performed	Participatory	Both
21.3%	25.3%	32.7%

Missions Preferences

Local	Global	“Glocal” (Both)
38.2%	5.9%	31.3%

Church Architecture Preferences

Traditional	Contemporary	Both
28.7%	19.1%	31.4%

6.0 Transforming Church Insight Executive Summary

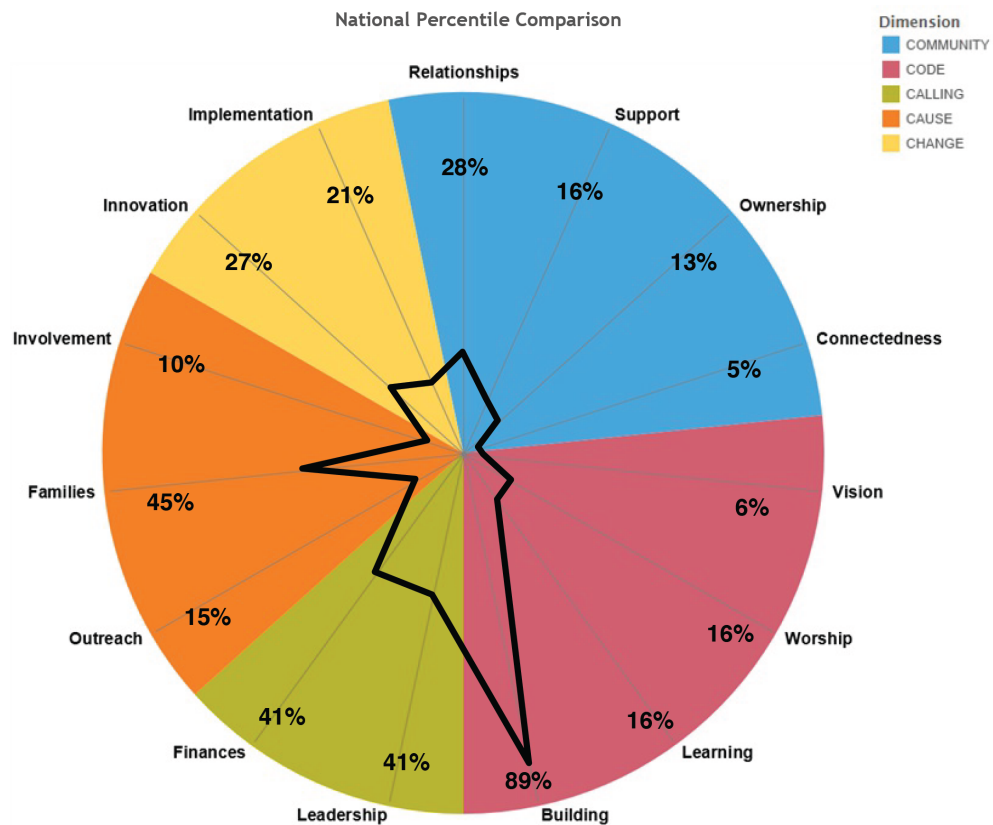
*Your TCI report was sent separately. For complete findings please refer to full report.

NATIONAL PERCENTILE COMPARISON



TRANSFORMING CHURCH INSIGHT

Colonial Church, Edina, MN (2017)



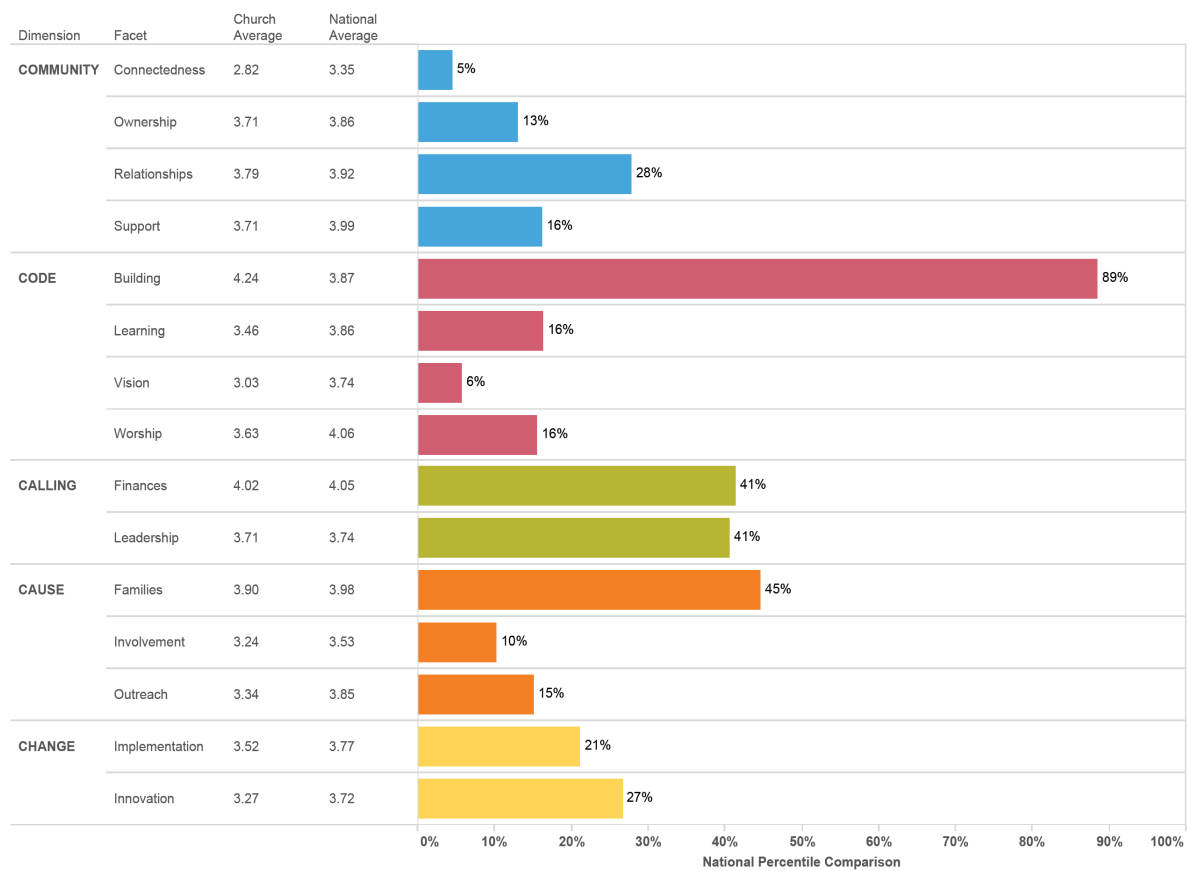
SCORE & PERCENTILE



TRANSFORMING CHURCH INSIGHT

Colonial Church, Edina, MN (2017)

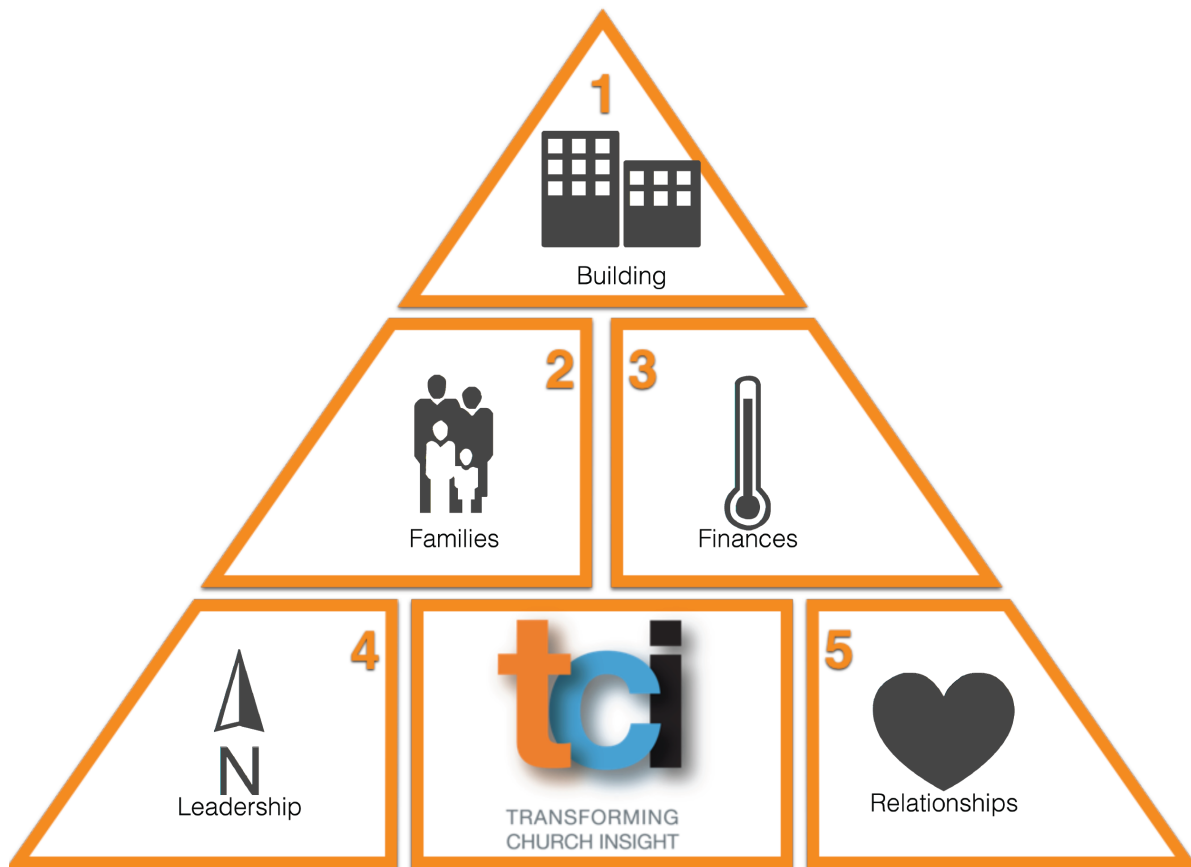
Score and Percentile Summary





TRANSFORMING
CHURCH INSIGHT

TOP 5 FACETS



OVERVIEW OF RESPONDENTS

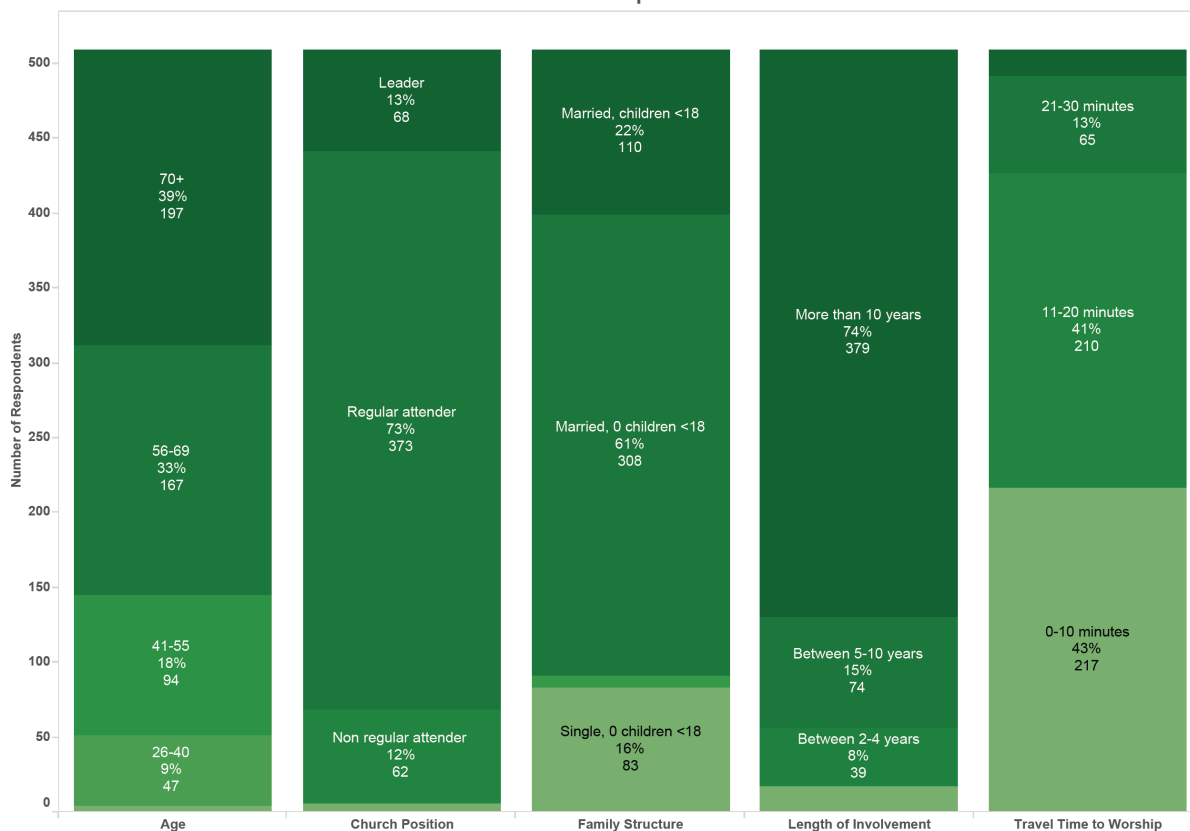


TRANSFORMING CHURCH INSIGHT

Colonial Church, Edina, MN (2017)

Respondents: 509

Overview of Respondents



OPEN-ENDED QUESTION THEMES

Strengths:

- Welcoming/friendly
- Pastoral staff and care
- Worship
- Members

Representative Quotes:

- “Warm and welcoming congregation; strong preaching, worship service (for the most part ...) beautiful buildings and surroundings; strong heritage and tradition; great potential to grow and share the gospel”
- “Our pastoral staff are all top notch. Our pastoral care is phenomenal especially in times of crisis. Mark Stover is incredibly talented and is a huge asset to our church. I'm excited about Carter and hope he is a great addition to our team. Marie does a wonderful job with the kids and their parents.”
- “Worship service is strong. Loving environment.”
- “The warm people who attend church as well as the leaders of the church.”

OPEN-ENDED QUESTION THEMES

Challenges:

- Aging congregation
- Communication
- Attracting younger families/people

Representative Quotes:

- “Too many Grey heads (mine included). We are an aging congregation. Those over 60 are the majority and it should be the other way around”
- “Communication needs to improve. Lots of our people do not use online resources. Using old fashioned mail once a month with descriptions about forth coming events/highlights would be helpful.”
- “Growth, relevance to young families and the next generation”

OPEN-ENDED QUESTION THEMES

Opportunities for Innovation:

- Innove
- Additional Ministries:
 - Community Outreach
 - Adult programs
 - Youth programs
 - Women's programs
 - Small groups
 - Outreach to community

Representative Quotes:

- “Innove was a big attraction to our joining the church; older generation supporting the youth”
- “Outreach - neighborhood, city, national and global. The programs should be a hand-up instead of a hand-out and either sustainable for working toward sustainability.”
- “young adult or young family resources getting more involvement from a variety of the the church members to assist in worship or programs”
- “Small groups - perhaps short term. Example: what Danielle did a few years ago with the women -- a 6 week gathering in small groups as I recall.”
- “Stronger focus on families, children and youth. Consider a formal invitation to Upper Room to join Colonial Church. CC needs an infusion of younger members, families and commitment. Our demographics aren't good, particularly when you consider the donor base attrition.”

OPEN-ENDED QUESTION THEMES

What drew you to Colonial and what keeps you here?

- Welcoming
- People
- Pastoral staff
- Feels like family

Representative Quotes:

- “Over 20 years ago, I was looking for a church to get married in. I felt very welcome the first time I walked in the door. All of my kids were baptized here. I have one confirmed and graduated and 2 more going through middle and high school. They like wednesday night. I enjoy the sermons.”
- “ministerial staff, location, Sunday worship, friends worship at Colonial, also.”
- “The people, Innove, staff, preaching”
- “It is the church of my husband's childhood. When I first came here I felt known, loved and cared for. But I think I felt that way because everyone already knew my husband and his family. As an introvert, I don't think I ever would have stayed without all of those people who "knew" me.”

OPEN-ENDED QUESTION THEMES

How could the church better support you and/or your family?

- Opportunities to serve the church
- All ages connection
- More outreach

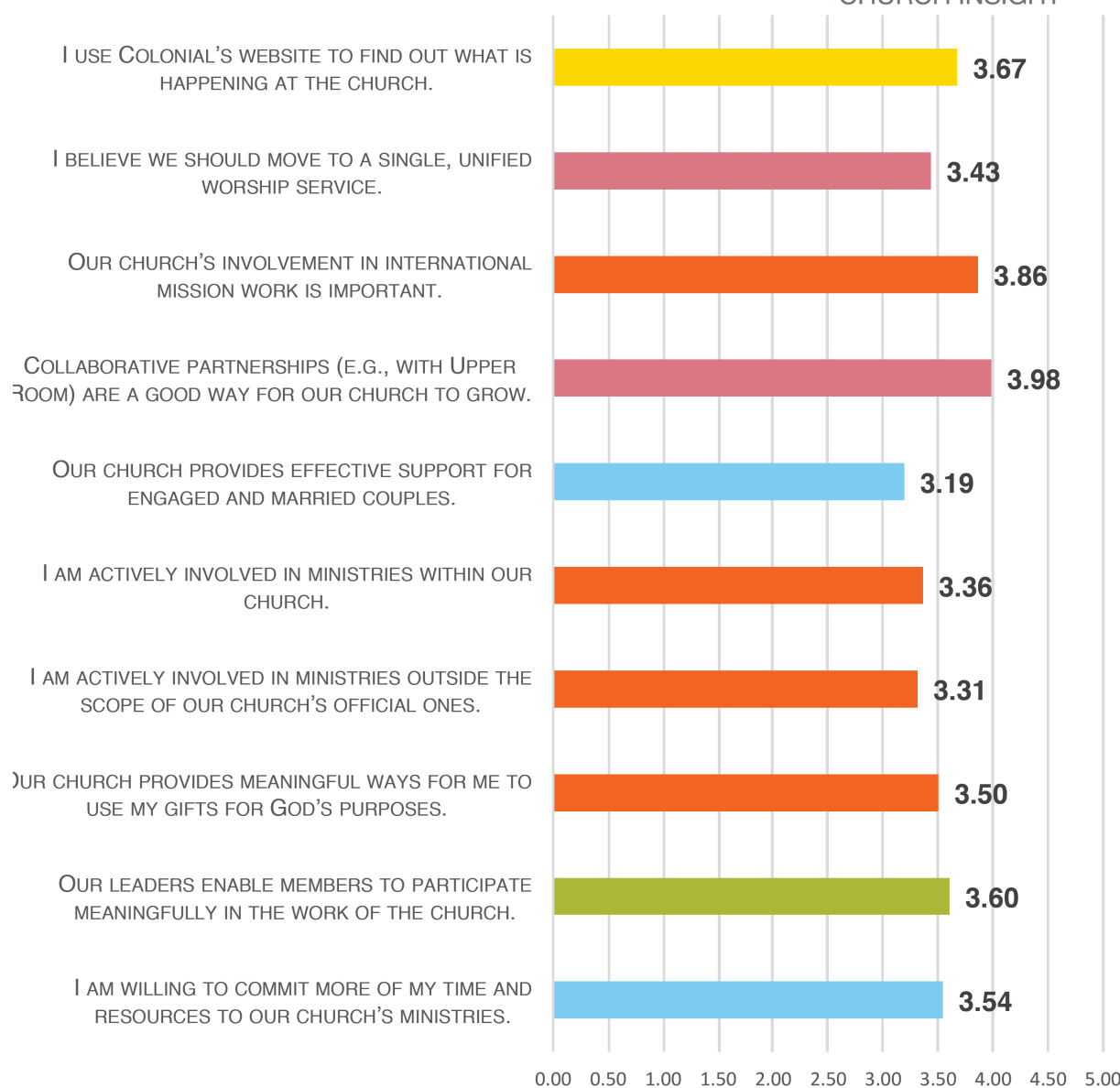
Representative Quotes:

- “It is more how should I be supporting the church.”
- “Challenge us more effectively to get involved”
- “1. More opportunities to connect congregation to all age groups. 2. Vibrant spiritual growth groups. 3. More opportunities to develop leadership outreach skills to reach out effectively in serving within our own community and to others in need locally-outside of our church...”
- “Have more outreach. We need to reach our communities around us and make them feel welcome. Bring more people to Christ.”



CUSTOM QUESTIONS

TRANSFORMING
CHURCH INSIGHT



7.0 Focus Group Comments

*The following comments are paraphrased. For the sake of confidentiality, we have not included participants' names. In addition, we do not include comments considered "off the record", but do address those issues verbally with leadership.

Group 1 – Ministry and Key Administrative Staff

Introductions / Strengths

- I attend here and started as a volunteer. My family has been here. This has been a nice balance with my husband. My parents and kids.
- Been here about 4 years. What drew me here – I was going through a transition at another church. They were in decline and were closing their doors. I was looking for something comforting. A good fit with my gifts and what I could offer. Of the churches I've worked at, this is the most secure in terms of benefits and pay and those things.
- I'm new here. I wasn't relationally connected at the other church I was at. It was too much management. I was excited to be a part of visioning for the future.
- I've been here 34 years. Third major role. What keeps me here is community. I love the people here and they love me. I have two grown kids and they had a great experience. Both my kids are in ministry as a result. Seen a lot of God at work in our midst.
- Been here 2 years. I was with the YMCA prior to this, looking for a change. I got to know Colonial through the move here with Upper Room. Generosity and innovative in their thinking. InnoVe. Having another church move into their building was cool.
- Multi-generation is a strength. Lots of viewpoints and chances to interact. The 9 am service is most multi-generational.
- A lot of multi-generational in Bible studies.
- Current staff. Competent and bringing new perspectives and ideas.
- High level of care for people. The focus on caring for people well. Jeff does a great job with the pastoral care.
- Even in staff meeting, we pray for people. From the pulpit, we pray for people by name. We really care for each individual.
- People really step up and help each other in practical ways.

- As a new person, we wanted to feel like we're part of the community. We stealth visited before we took the job. My wife and I felt incredibly welcomed. If my wife misses a week or two, people notice.
- The multi-generational relationships are good.
- This facility and piece of land. People know that we're here.
- The building is used a lot during the week.
- It's a beautiful building.
- Operations – the resources we've been blessed with. AV equipment, etc. If you need something, you can get it.
- There's a pretty good diversity of theology and ideology. We have extreme liberals and extreme conservatives.
- We do address issues. We don't ignore them.
- We're pretty broad theologically, as long as we agree on foundational pieces.
- Covenantal non-creedal.
- Even back in the day when we had series on topics, it would be from all perspectives.
- We have a pastor who preaches from a balanced and thoughtful perspective. He challenges people to be a thinking Christian.
- We're a centered-set, not a bounded-set.
- Within the week of our church, we are fine with a lot of diversity – from high church to very irreverent stuff and it's really lovely. It surprises me that the people who are high church can really connect with the kids and those who are messy.
- Our organist and choir are amazing. Our volunteer choir is amazing.
- Our music is incredible.

Weaknesses / Challenges / Issues

- I think we're not really clear that our faith is built on the rock – but what is the rock? How we've always done it can be the rock. There's some resistance to change – how we used to do it.
- In general, the nostalgia factor is high. Not just here, but in Edina in general. It's hard to re-imagine things here.
- The congregational church is made up of a lot of "recovering" people from denominations. That's a great strength and a great weakness. You don't have a synod and hierarchy. You have to have a common understanding, but it's hard to get there.
- You have a lot of Type A people who are used to running things.

- Congregationalism was meant for groups of 70, not for 3,000. Life is changing. The church is changing. It's hard to build consensus with such a large church.
- We had one very strong leader who was here for 30 years and it was really his vision. People still felt like they had a voice and a vote. As long as it stayed within certain boundaries, your vote counted. It was always set up in a way that was going to get his way. That eventually turned on him.
- We need to continue the diversity. I do think you need to be careful about those democratic types of systems – too slow to change sometimes. I question about whether or not the majority is always helpful.
- We've got to figure out how to listen to the minority when they aren't really in the majority.
- Communications – bulletin, newspaper, etc. is an issue. We have a lot of people who go to Florida for five months and then complain about the communication.
- I would like to see the older generation grow in empathy for the younger generation. They want to see families and youth here and they'll give money to that. But the younger generation needs people to connect with them in relationships. Not just give money, but give time.
- The people who would like to do that don't know how. For example, we're all glad that Upper Room is here. But there's a gap between the generations – they don't know how to connect to the Upper Room.
- This is a church for over 50-60 year olds and older stylistically.
- Having a pot of coffee and lemonade doesn't create space where people can relate.
- The gulf between Colonial and UR is five hours.
- We have diversity on staff, but we get into our own lane doing our own thing for our own people. We default to silos.
- I don't think we have a shared vision. There's a big question mark.
- There's a tension because we're congregational. It's harder to bring a diverse people along with a common vision.
- Some churches can say we feel like can have a vision and lose people. Not sure we can do that.
- If we feel strong about it, we do go out on the limb. This building is an example.
- Daniel is still in his first gig – and he's still learning about where do we risk and where do we not?
- It was pretty tumultuous when he first came in.

- I think this church has a great history of being missional. To identify a very clear missional goal that could allow multi-generational participation. That has historically been international. I think it needs to be local. I think there's a lot of work done in the city and locally.
- I think we did the first round of Innove, I thought this might be one of those things that we might keep moving forward with.
- It never caught.
- Since we are theologically diverse, being missional allows people to center on something. The danger that has tilted in the past is to allow everyone to do their own pet project.
- I agree. The pet project thing can be a problem, and that happens on staff.
- Adult education may be an issue. Need to explore that.
- Youth has been in transition.

Group 2 – Lay Leaders

Introductions / Strengths

- Been involved in teaching. Church board and church council. Deacon board. I came to Colonial – working at another church. Arthur was preaching. I was on vacation and came here. Very creative. Open. Welcoming. Desire to be faithful to God's word. Very eclectic. Some conservative and some not.
- Came here in 7th grade. I've never left. I made a connection with our youth minister way back then. I missed the walk from the old building to the new building. I really don't know anything. No reason to leave. I get frustrated when people leave because they don't like things. It's the people, not the program.
- I started here in first grade. I didn't realize there were other churches. I got married in college and when it was time to decide which church to get married it was easy because my wife was Catholic. So we got married here. We didn't go here a lot until we had kids. Then came to pray for ourselves when we had kids. And it keeps going from there. You have to get involved. We did Sunday School and all that sort of thing. Been in finance and council.
- Been here since 1971. I grew up Baptist. Husband was Lutheran. I was involved in Young Life. They recommended Colonial. We had seen Arthur and went here for a concert. He had long hair and was cool. It was a struggle at first because it was congregational. Things were hopping here. Became

leaders – deacon, council, search committees, building and design, grounds. It was healthy and good.

- I married into this church. I've stayed and feel like this is where God speaks to me. Deep relationships with people here. I've always appreciated Colonial being multi-generational. I have older and younger people that I'm connecting to.
- We've been here since we were married here 30 years ago. When I moved back as a young working person, my family was already here. Like a lot of people, we came from different faith backgrounds. Colonial meets in the middle. Diverse staff and congregation. Being able to come together and love one another. I've been involved in just about everything.
- I've been here for 10 years. Been on Council. Innove. When we moved here, we knew someone from the church and this was one of the places we checked out and we liked this – multigenerational. We didn't want the young people's church plant. There wasn't a pastor when we joined. Diversity of thought coupled with warmth.
- I think the most recent hires have all been outstanding.
- We wanted Daniel to have his first year without furor. It got so ugly during Westfall. How can we change the atmosphere to be more positive? We started changing how we did meetings.
- We went through a discernment process about the money, and now we're going through something similar again. To get the congregation to agree as to how to spend that money was daunting.
- We had lots of communication. That was 2012 when we voted and everyone was on board.
- When Daniel asked how people had been involved, they defined themselves based on the committee. He was overwhelmed with how many committees we had. We need to move from meetings to ministry. That's where Innove folded out. That was great.
- The music. We have a fantastic choir director and he's a minister also. He ministers to us. He's half-time some place else. We're always thankful that he's here. He is fantastic and making us cohesive. He cares about you.
- We have a great building. It needs a lot of money.
- Improvements over the last few years have been good.
- The children's ministry seems to be going well from what I can see. But I'm on the outside looking in.

- The building. Upper Room. But the building is empty most of the time. We can continue thinking creatively about how we can use this space.
- The collaboration with Upper Room keeps getting better and better.
- We do communication well for the big stuff, but not for the ongoing daily stuff isn't good.

Weaknesses / Challenges / Issues

- We've not had a relationally strong staff. Not accessible. They don't hang around. Not warm and fuzzy.
- I do think people have a hard time getting involved. You have to know someone. I think this affects people who have been here for a while but haven't been involved. They aren't involved in anything. There's very few ways to connect them and get them involved.
- Lack of connections. There aren't places for people to make connections in smaller communities. Most of the classes are for a few weeks at a time. They're more topical. Led by theologians.
- There are almost no small communities to connect that are ongoing. I think there are some long-stand small groups that don't meet in the church.
- I joined the choir and that has become my community.
- I've been at churches where if someone was going to teach Sunday School, they'd be there every week. There's no continuity here.
- We had a lot of gathering groups in the 90s. Your gathering group would be a 9 and then you'd go to church. You'd be there all morning. We made the commitment and those fostered the relationships that have continued for me. That just fizzled out.
- I think one of the real challenges we face is how to bring in the next generation. We're not doing a good job of that. We have great staff for children and youth. The next generation doesn't show up at church.
- I don't buy that. I see these other churches that have tons of young people.
- I don't think we're very welcoming.
- My perception is that the communication isn't as strong. We have the bulletin and it's just a line or two about things coming up. You don't know what it is. It says check out the website. You go the website and it doesn't give any more context. It's a spot on a calendar, rather than a description. Is it open to all? What's it for?
- You can't put anything on the wall. That's a limitation. Nothing visual to communicate what we're doing.

- You can't have enough communication. Over-communicate. We've eliminated all of that.
- We got rid of the committees and that was how things got filtered.
- We treat our church as a country club – what can the church do for me?
- Those who have stayed through all that we've been through are weary. We expect our staff to take care of things.
- We've had lots of senior staff changes. Some that were harder than others. Some choices that were made by present senior staff. John Westfall's time was very challenging and his time leaving. There are wounds that are very deep. We're skeptical and quick to judge. Before we were more filled with grace.
- Jack wanted to be the senior pastor. After he'd been here for a year, he confused the congregation. That caused another huge wound.
- Present staff haven't really focused on helping bring about healing.
- I think Daniel could see what was going on from the outside.
- Some of the communications need a project director. Sometimes people have conversations for months and then announce it and wonder why they don't get support.
- Church Council meetings are communicated. That would be helpful.
- We have a room that needs to be fixed. We've been talking about that for two years. We don't know where to get the money from. Somewhere in administration we've lost something. We've been staff-challenged. We don't have a membership to support the physical size of the church.
- Daniel has been very effective at pairing down staff needs.
- There doesn't seem to be anyone at the helm with management types of things. I think we went too far from meetings to ministry.
- We were supposed to have task forces. But they felt handpicked. So you lost the sense that I'm a regular person to be involved.
- We don't have a primary operations manager role. We've paired so much that we have paired down essentials.
- I'm wondering if giving is down because we know we have 4.5 million?
- There's a lot of older people who are quietly leaving. Their kids aren't here. Some of it is discontent. Some of them are dying. But for the most part, the relationships aren't there. We don't have a pastoral pastor. One of them is relational, but people don't feel connected here.

Group 3 – Volunteers

Introductions / Strengths

- The only church I've ever been to. Came since before I was born. This is where I worship and learn.
- I've been here 12 years. Raised Catholic. I like that there's a worship service that has some tradition and some mix.
- At our other church, I minister didn't have the Bible in the pulpit. So we marched over here and looked into this church. David Fisher helped us. I needed a church grounded in faith and Scripture.
- We were raised Presbyterian. Not many around here. We didn't find any churches that fit. Wanted a church that preached the Scripture. So many preached "You're okay, I'm okay". We came over here and said oh that's it. Arthur was minister then. We've been very pleased.
- Been here 40 years. This was a good home for our family, young family. I was raised Catholic and he was Methodist, so we found a comforting middle ground and place of worship here. The family has scattered and I am the one who remains.
- We were at another church for a number of years. What caused us to come back here: 1) less conservative theologically 2) the Innove program – the social aspects was a draw and 3) son was an early member at Upper Room and it was meaningful that they struck a deal with them. I hope that relationship will deepen. I think we need a youth movement.
- I grew up Covenant. My husband was Episcopalian. It's Scripture based but not hung up on denominational trappings.
- Came here 50 years ago. Was on staff. I thought I should look for another church but realized that the people had been our family the whole time.
- I think the building is very inviting.
- Good strong leaders, but they do the same thing.
- There's a comfort in the predictability of what church will be like. Nothing terribly unexpected. We don't have things outside our comfort zone.
- Worship service is a real strength. I love the choir.
- Music.
- The music program has always been a strength. I appreciate that the church seeks out leadership in the music ministry.
- The choir has become my small group. You have to be involved in a smaller group.

- Everyone kind of raised their families together. Only 20% of attenders actually go regularly. We need to figure out what's our ministry in Edina? We need to figure out how to get connected better locally.

Weaknesses / Challenges / Issues

- The invitation inside the building. People know each other but don't branch out to other groups. We don't reach out to people. We need a younger congregation. We need young people to come in and renew their faith. They say church attendance once a month is regular.
- We have cliques. I think that's part of life.
- A lot of people don't get involved because they're not asked.
- There are a lot of people with talent. People sign up to volunteer but don't get called. But the same people tend to do everything. They don't have a good system in place for targeting volunteers.
- There's no follow up. A phone call would be very helpful.
- I think we could do a better job educating the congregation about our missions and what they do.
- I don't know what our missions are and that we're doing wonderful things. Is there a list?
- Communications is poor. I would like to know what's going on. What are we doing?
- The same people do the work and don't incorporate other people.
- We need better organization. We used to have a business person who took care of a lot of things.
- We need an executive director or COO type of person.
- As the finances got worse, people left and weren't rehired. The funds got reallocated.
- Lack of organization. The senior minister can't do it all.
- One of the most helpful things would be to have a volunteer coordinator – someone to help mobilize people.
- Volunteering is more of an opt-in thing rather than a recruiting thing.
- I have no idea how the Church Council is selected.
- I echo that.
- We have the Colonial Foundation and the Church Council.
- Council is elected at the annual meeting. They have responsibility for year to year financials.

- The Foundation is independent. I think they're working more closely now. Foundation is about physical needs.
- Every committee is elected at the annual meeting.
- Now that we're getting into MN Winter, I think it would be helpful to have a transportation plan.
- I'd like to see more small group Bible studies.
- There are very few. I think there's about 2-3.
- The small groups in people's homes don't exist anymore.
- My long term belief is that it would benefit Upper Room and Colonial to merge into one church. But you have to walk before you can run. As many collaborative kinds of things as possible.
- I'd like to know more about the Upper Room in general. I don't know much about them. If younger people are going, that's fabulous. But I know nothing about it.
- Communication is weak.
- The church needs younger people, but the older people provide the financial support. So then you need to invite younger families with the expectation that they are going to stay and grow into the church and eventually support it.
- I think our church is horrible for finances. The finance committee does a good job. We used to do pledges. We don't have a stewardship committee. We vote on the budget and we assume that the money is going to come out of thin air. The finance committee budgets based on last year's income with a little staff increase.
- Why did we get rid of pledging?
- The faith pledges may not have been honored.
- Our windfall may create an instinct to not give. I want to be a part of giving and supporting the direction. That's a real risk.
- That money is separate from how we really operate.
- It's a taboo subject.
- When Daniel talks about money, he reminds us this is not a charity. This is our home. He does a good job with that.
- Daniel has a tendency to want to stand apart from the financials, so that leaves a void. Maybe we do need a stewardship committee.
- Upper Room is drawing from every where.
- We went for 20 years to CPC and didn't have anyone to go have coffee with. We already knew people here. But there was some programming available – Danielle Jones placed us in a group with three couples and that's in a very

short period of time. That has been a meaningful part of our social fabric. How do you have the church become part of your social life?

Group 4 –Part of Community 20+ years

Introductions / Strengths

- Loving place. Always been come as you are place. Welcoming. Friendliness of the people here.
- The spirit has remained alive and well – the Spirit of God. Tough times but the spirit of God has remained.
- At least a remnant of the Spirit has always been here.
- The community and the fellowship of people in work and love and joy and sadness and support of the community.
- I love our focus on Scripture and our willingness to try new things.
- Opportunities to grow spiritually.
- I'd like to underline that there is heart and head here combined, in every aspect of our church life.
- Full time teaching ministers – so seminary level teaching but also focused on the heart.
- We're all called to have a ministry, not just a minister up there in the pulpit and we're taking it all in.
- 45 years of full time teaching ministry. This is a great legacy.
- Family friendly church, a place where people have opportunity to get involved in any way they care to get involved.
- Those of us who are still here we have weathered a lot together,
- Times when this church was exceedingly popular and busy and can be and times we have not got along well with one another because of tough decisions
- Some small groups that have been alive for decades.
- Very welcoming place for people with a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences in their faith journey..
- A lot of chances for people to participate.
- We hear and see Jesus and hang onto him – he is number one
- Worship is over the top great and the music is first rate.
- Sermons and music.
- Our chef is wonderful – Wed night meals are great.

Weaknesses / Challenges / Issues

- We do everything online now and I don't track with that.
- Used to be a central place to gather around and see needs – not as easy anymore.
- Used to be a huge board with all these needs posted – I can help do a meal here, can you help me?. Community of the church gathered physically with each other filling in blanks to help others.
- A mini church gathered around this board.
- Now online is very efficient and good but there is a lack of intimacy - there is no face to face.
- More people our age in the church our age – aging congregation.
- When we were younger we brought lots of people. But that's not our role so much anymore.
- People we know are committed here or committed somewhere else –
- Much smaller and aging church.
- None of our kids are attending the church – no longer multiple generations attending here.

- Some younger people feel they are fed spiritually better elsewhere. Glad they are with faith filled people and fulfilling God's call but we don't have people behind us to carry on.
- In the 1970s it seemed very vibrant compared to today. Since then things have been going down slowly.
- 1990's never replaced the pastoral care role. JoAnne Metcalf.
- Huge affection for her.
- She was the great connector. I was fascinated by her.
- She would linger with you; she was never in a hurry. And then would make connections.
- We all love Jeff but we have not replaced her presence.
- We don't have relationship building like we did then – Arthur was very relational. We've been thru periods where we did not have that sense of connectivity.

- The heart piece here is not what it has been historically. We are sorely missing that. When you used to come out of church you could hardly get into the commons and hang out and meet new people. New members felt this is a relational place where we can find community.

We don't have that now.

- Leadership is much more top down than it used to be.
- I don't really know what the chain of command is – who do you go to?
- I always thought we were a Congregational church and that is supposed to mean the people are key to making the church work. Staff is supposed to work for the people and help them do the work.
- Daniel's sermons tend to be beautifully written essays but when I go and I leave I can't say "Here's what I am going to hold on to this week".

- Miss the people on committees who worked on missions or adult ed or whatever it was. They were a meeting of minds.
- Daniel made unilateral decisions to get rid of committees. The committees were the wheels of the church.
- Back then the ministers didn't have to do all the work – people were doing it, more was being done than.
- We were empowered to do ministry. I get that more women work out of the home now.
- We don't hear much about what people are doing in the church – in terms of maybe five minutes in the church service.
- There isn't a system to mobilize the people. There is not a format for mobilizing.
- You don't feel like you are sent out the door with a sense of mission I am saying "Send me! I want to go".
- For most of us our time at church is a small percentage of our lives. How are we equipping people to be shining lights in the rest of their lives? Spiritual formation used to be a huge part of the fabric of this church. Where does it fit now?
- We have a center for spiritual formation but all we do there now is spiritual direction. Unless you are going deeper you are not really growing. Bible studies are not the same as growing deeper.

- Connected on Emotionally Healthy Spiritually. Missed a chance to both foster spiritual growth – but also to build a bridge with a younger congregation.

- I wonder if Daniel's heart has changed in a positive way – last month of sermons have been wonderful – ok to be broken and grow deeper in your faith. He has been saying we need to change and rejuvenate this church. Upper Room is a real possibility to transforming things.

-We used to be known as the people who were out there – Colonial people were everywhere. We stood in our world and addressed the issues of our world.

-We used to be more engaged in the lives outside the church.

-Today kids who are younger would say that we are nowhere near as relevant.

-We used to be known for outreach and we're not so much anymore.

-We had an annual meeting where someone asked what is the vision going forward and there was no good answer forthcoming.

-There aren't many places where I go when I feel younger and this is one of them. There is too much of a heritage and tradition here of relevance to let it go by the boards.

-Sometimes our age group does not want change – but we do! WE want vibrancy and intimacy and connection. Have something for us to go do.

Group 5 – Parents of Children

Introductions / Strengths

- Jeff Lindsay – welcoming, warm genuine, available, constant
- This church feels like home - it is a safe place and warm.
- I love that my kids love to come here. 5 year old, son 2 years old. 5 year old girl cries when we can't go – everybody loves seeing them , kids go running down to Marie and the other workers.
- The bagels! Kids love them. She talks about God and what they talked about in class and the songs.
- Women's ministry here has been amazing Some really neat previous generation ladies who love to help and offer advice and are available.
- Women's Mon AM and Wed night study. Women's retreat has been meaningful. Group called Connect for Parenting.
- For me as an individual and a parent – my kids are ECSTATIC to come (10 and 8). For them the key is fun and they get to hang out with friends. For me
- As an individual it is the music – I sing in the choir, Mark Stover's ministry.
- The support – my daughter had open heart surgery in April and also near birth. Daniel, Jeff, Marie were all great at giving support and prayer.
- I like the sermons and the teaching aspect of the church – I love the staff
- I love the sermons too.
- I think Daniel is a nice fit – has a little bit of humor and a nice message.

- Good number of guest speakers – 4 or 5 a year – my husband really likes that variety.
- Joe from the Upper Room is great when he speaks or leads.
- Not just the Daniel show, but people prefer him.
- Marie is such a fantastic leader. Her programming.
- My kids did not like to come to church till middle school – so we come on Wed, not Sun. There is something that happens on Wed night in middle school that is fun and inviting and that has really recommitted our family to this church.
- I like Colonial because the classes are a little smaller than some churches where we live – it is a big church but it feels small. I feel like my kids are known here.

Weaknesses / Challenges / Issues

- Small size for kids – if your kids aren't happy it is hard to keep coming here.
- Other churches seem to have more thriving kids' ministries.
- Have taught Sunday school when there were only two kids – why are we doing this? But that's not the case for every grade – just not a lot of consistency.
- Hard to find volunteers when there are such low numbers.
- There is too much turnover and change in volunteers in kids' ministries. I never get into services anymore – I serve every weekend we can make it.
- Consistency is really powerful for kids – the biggest challenge is getting a consistent face.
- We have this great pool of multi-generations – I wish that at times that people who weren't current parents of kids would step in and help.
- In the devotional time before the Focus Group the leader said let's just be quiet and focus – we never get to do that around here. We're always parenting or volunteering!
- Would love to have different generations working with different age groups.
- Would love to have high schoolers volunteering – we used to have some! The few that are there are really important.
- Hard to get here on Sundays because our kids are in sports.
- What do we do to infuse some new life into this for younger families – create a sense of community for younger families. I look around this table and wonder why have I not seen you guys?
- What do we take what is so good about this church and connect it with this demographic?

- What our kids like: a sense of community and connectedness – my husband and I don't feel that with other couples at this church.
- People in this day and age are so busy, the world is changing every single day. We just don't have time to have a 60 minute service all the time, as wonderful as it is. Could we offer a 30 minute service on Wed nights for parents and families?
- I wish on Wednesday nights there was something consistent – a consistent class instead of ones that are more like electives.
- I wish things were more like Young Life – where it's fun and relational and then there is a short message of something tied to the Bible.
- I drive by Braemar Arena – hockey arena – on Sunday morning, more cars there than here. That's the religion.
- We need to minister to parents not just kids. Say we know you are stretched thin and on the verge of sanity and we can serve and help you.
- I think there is a stronger sense of community on Wednesday nights than Sunday mornings. More consistent people and you are all sitting at tables in a room for the dinner. And then there are lots of opportunities after the dinner.
- Would love times on Wed night for parents to have food for our soul. I think it is actually good for us to be forced to connect with each other!
- A little more support and options for child care – when we don't have to volunteer.
- Two desires – do they contradict? A desire for quiet – and a desire to connect with other parents in a more social setting.
- How do you connect? I know you get what you give but 'how is your relationship with God?' Is just not an icebreaker for us.
- What if we had something for adults after the Wed dinner and before the kids' program – something to keep us there instead of just working on our laptops or running errands.
- Wednesday night is a key – people dedicate Wednesday nights to families and they would be here in a minute.
- I don't know that people in the community know what's going on here like they know what's going on at CPC (Comm. Pres Church) or Mount Olivet.
- We used to be known for Pyro – but now that's gone.
- When Arthur Rouner was here it was the mission to Africa.
- I get a lot of what is Colonial? What is Congregational? Not a real strong community sense of who we are.
- Who is on the Board and do they really represent the congregation?

- We all want this great church back? But we may not be able to make a weekend retreat - but we need to be represented.

Group 6 – Parents of Youth

Introductions / Strengths

- Youth programming – Wed night as well as Pyro.
- Community. – sense of belonging and connectedness. Something I had never experienced before. For my kids to have many people speaking into their lives. Lots of people know our kids.
- The tradition, knowing the hymns and prayers – you can count on it. Congregational background, I love the liturgy – want it to continue.
- I felt parented by this church and the connection between that and traditions. That connection actually connected me to Jesus.
- My kids have two different experiences going thru here – one in college and one still in HS. Both are positive, though the one still in HS has had some challenges due to turnover.
- Jeff has been there for me during some traumatic times in my life – he is so important to me.
- What drew me to this church was actually the nontraditional aspect of it. I wanted my girls to have something not “church”.
- The building draws us all in – it’s so open. A “Meeting house” not a chapel – it is a gathering place.
- I love the traditional service.
- But there is something for everyone.
- From a theological standpoint – I grew up Catholic so this was a fresh perspective,.
- There are some cornerstones here, but there is not a lot of dogma or ritual that is imposed on you here.
- We are able to be open and honest about our theological differences.
- There’s no groupthink – this is a great place to be a questioner! I actually think the differences and openness is a great gift. I like that people have options.
- I love the fact that we are Congregational – we are led by Council and the people of the church make the decisions, I love this more than the Presbyterian and Methodist churches our family was a part of. We’re led by listening ears that are always asking questions and inviting people into the process.

- Growing up here I just felt loved – that was the message I heard more than anything else. We got married here, first time my spouse had been here – just a sense of abounding grace and love.
- That's my experience too – Catholic background – this is a whole different vantage point for me.
- The girls like this – so I am on board.
- If my kids like what's here, then I am 100% here.
- For my kids, Pyro was the best thing ever.
- Carter I think is going to be awesome – he has not had a chance to develop his program yet but the early signs are good.
- Carter gets the kids but has their respect – he listens to their music but still leads and really reaches out.

Weaknesses / Challenges / Issues

- Pyro – maybe changed to have a little more oversight.
- There is a critical time with youth where you keep them or lose them. I don't know that we do a great job with that critical time.
- Confirmation is the critical time here.
- Aaron bailed or was asked to leave in the middle of confirmation – all of the kids got dumped.
- My kids are saying we want to go to a different Wednesday night program.
- The last transition in youth leadership was traumatic.
- When Nicole left there was a vacuum.
- I feel like the kids and parents need more of a connection with Daniel and Jeff.
- I think the youth need to be involved with all of the leaders of the church.
- Daniel tends to be the teacher and the intellectual – would be great if he could let his hair down with kids every now and then.
- Demographics. We just don't draw younger families. We are a very old church. Which is a good thing in some ways – the inter generational aspect. But I think churches that grow rapidly are the ones that have a vision that unites everyone and that everyone gets behind. We need something that pulls us all back together, we need a concrete idea.
- We don't market the church to a broad enough group. Now, we don't want to lose the older folks but we do need momentum.
- The community is not aware of all the great things that are happening here.
- There is a certain desire to 'glory day' it here. Back to Arthur's days. But we're not in the same world as Arthur was in.

- I think it's not fair that people compare Daniel to Arthur and JoAnne - - but they do, especially the older generation.
- We are just really missing the relational component, the sense of connection that people talk about during Arthur's days.
- Need for more men's fellowship for the younger professional types.
- Dudes and Donuts is good – but we still need more. You really have to try hard to plug in here .
- Part of the gap we are feeling here is we really need this new community life pastor. Whoever that person is has to pay more attention to the men – there is nothing really there for them, and no one is really in charge of it. There is a lack of things here for men to feel connected.
- We need the men to get into a healthier place so that the ripple effect goes.
- We work hard all week and when I come to church I don't want it to be 'up there', so deep and intellectual. I need something that is relatable and I can apply to my life.
- I really want more of a connection with our top leader.
- Miss things like the Family Retreat – really connected people.
- Have to be honest – this two hours (focus group and devotional time) has been better than anything else in a while.

Group 7 – Part of the Community 5 years or less

Introductions / Strengths

- Daniel's sermons – a very relatable pastor, shares the word, I can identify how it applies to everyday life.
- The people. I love the folks here including people in this room that I have gotten to know!
- I love Daniel and also Daniel's sermons. I find him to be challenging intellectually and also spiritually. I like the he has a scientific approach to things.
- The scientific facts really authenticate the Bible.
- Love Jeff because he is warm and outgoing and knows is personally.
- I also love Marie Wonders – love the Life Apps from Sunday morning.
- They go out of their way to make Christmas so special.
- The choir and the music program are wonderful.
- Mark Stover is phenomenal.
- The Guelich Lectures are great – variety.

- I like the attention to the arts that Daniel brings – we have actual artists come in here.
- It's really good and healthy to have lots of guest speakers.
- The online access to the sermons.
- Children's program – This congregation is so committed to developing its kids. In the 80s this was the place to be, that may not be the same now but the core commitment has always been there.
- Congregation and youth very integrated – uncommonly.
- I love the building. Nice to have so much room and it is very warm space.
- Building has art and that is nice.
- You can see it from the highway – it's really visible and beautiful when you drive on 62. It's homey and welcoming.
- Family member went thru health crisis 6 years ago and the church took such good care of us. I had never before known what community meant. Never had that experience before.
- Grandson loves Pyro – he will miss sports just to go to that camp. Other grandkids love Wed night Bible study – goes to bed reading Children's Bible.
- The deacons are devoted to trying to have a welcoming and friendly atmosphere. Lots of energy goes into that welcoming environment.
- I love the greeters at the door, they are always smiling – and even in the winter they are outside! Even if you are a stranger it's like you're not.
- Church gives opportunities to interact. Between services.
- Loved the opportunity for volunteer for Families Moving Forward – I love volunteering outside the church.
- The gardening is really cool.
- So many ways to give back, lots of volunteer opportunities.

Weaknesses / Challenges / Issues

- Hard to break in here.
- Last church I went to pastor had a lot of affairs. We don't put Daniel on a pedestal here and I think that's really important. We have to hold people accountable, be really careful to do that.
- I don't know how much authority the Council has over the leading ministers. Do we have a process in place to hold pastors accountable?
- Do we do a good enough job of keeping people from being isolated?

- I have 35 friends who grew up in this church – and now though their parents go here they don't anymore. They are going to CPC. CPC built buzz and momentum and got going as the place to be.
- Our challenge is the next generation – our members are getting older and dying.
- I don't know if Colonial has ever done anything with marketing and PR.
- Even more than that, how are we doing in personal invitation? I don't think we're bringing enough people in by invitations.
- I think the church is too tightly controlled by the senior generation – they are entrenched and have a lot of money. I feel like people are actively undermining the second service.
- Looking back to the meeting a year ago where we were talking about one service – meeting was dominated by people who have disrespect for those who listen to music other than theirs.
- I felt that we (second service) were being excluded.
- We can't have the existing group define the future of the ministry. But they are the heavy donors and they have the influence and they are entrenched.
- We need to realize more and more that the church is just not in church – but out of church too.
- We need more activities and options for younger couples.
- I see too much ministering to ourselves and not enough ministering outside the four walls. We need to build relationships and community by serving others. Jesus wants us not just to learn the Word but to take the Word and put action to it.
- Younger people are looking for an opportunity to make a difference outside the church.
- Even though we are set up for people to participate, people don't participate.
- I wish Daniel could focus less on academic subjects and more on how can we serve Jesus in our everyday lives. I feel like there is a big gap between the philosophical and scientific and what we need to do in our everyday lives.
- Would love to see more ethnic and racial diversity in the church.
- The way we present ourselves on social media is not aggressive enough. We need someone in control of that who knows how to do it.

Group 8 – Part of Community 6-19 years

Introductions / Strengths

- The people, the staff, the minister, the people I know here.
- The way Daniel can take a sermon and he can make it understandable and applicable to so many people. He can get pretty heady. NO matter where you are there is a nugget you can latch onto.
- He brings in personal experience.
- He falls on his sword a lot.
- Does wild things like cooks and breaks pottery.
- Has a great sense of humor.
- Non traditional, complementary practices.
- Masterful
- One of the most authentic people I have ever come across. He is 100 percent real.
- He is very approachable.
- I love trusting the kids ministry – have a 4 and 6 year old. I can drop them off without a doubt about what they will hear and be taught – a God of love and beauty who cares about them.
- The kids program drew us and kept us here.
- Love Pyro, loves coming every Wednesday.
- I love on Xmas Eve for the family service, when the live animals come in I cry every time that happens. There is something like magic. I love the creativity and the meeting people where they are at.
- InnoVe project and launching the Jones in that direction.
- It's so refreshing to hear what the rest of you love.
- Daniel brings an intellectual gift to our congregation that I have been seeking all of my life and have not been able to find it.
- Jeff is this beautiful human being that cares about you and we all adore him.
- Then Marie is this joyous ball of life – I adore the fact that she is bringing God in such a fun way to my daughter – such a gift and blessing.
- I volunteer with the staff and get to interact with them.
- I think that it is a blessing that our pastoral staff are who they are. Not one of them is perfect – one person can't be everything. We have a beautiful team.
- You can't be all things to all people and the staff doesn't try to do that, which is good.

- Thankful that choir functions as a small group of 40-50 people that ends with a prayer meeting. Mark has this unreasonable gift to be able to do music in every style yet he is a shepherd and people lover and pastors the choir really well.
- My love for Innove and what it did for outsiders – it brought our congregation together and finding out what they do in their daily lives. An opportunity for people to bring their gifts, purpose and passion to God. Has helped me be more intentional about my vocation.
- Changed my perspective on missions completely – focused us more on our own community,
- I also really love the one service, brings my daughter into the meeting house for a part of the service.

Weaknesses / Challenges / Issues

- Noted that three families/friends have recently left because Daniel was so heady and not relational enough.
- In confirmation watched Daniel struggle to bring things down to earth.
- We're not matching our season – I am not sure we know what we are called to be. We need to be clear about that.
- If we go to one service I am worried that the second service people may not be as nurtured. What we are calling merged is 90% old school.
- We don't have childcare for infants right now. This is a huge barrier to friends I want to bring. Needs to be an employed position.
- We are going to spend millions on a roof but we can't provide child care for church events
- We should supply childcare for every event that is scheduled.
- Another example is Wednesday nights – not enough support for kids.
- Parenting education classes. Wished there was something coming from my church community with that spiritual support.
- We don't come as often as we would like to because of lack of childcare – we have two kids at home.
- Once was at a church meeting where people were speaking hateful things to one another. We have a long history of staying divided due to spiritual/political issues.
- How do we heal and reconcile so that we can be united in Christ and God instead of holding onto baggage?
- We are strengthened by our differences in terms of liberal and conservative stuff but we need to talk about those things more.

- The common thread in all of these things that are wrong is trust.
- My main concern is finding a way to address the needs of people who like the second service. I sense the staff has an agenda to take us to one service and I am afraid the second service people will get crushed.
- Communication is not good – it is sporadic. Don't want to feel like I am an outsider when I hear something. How do we do a better job of that?
- Are Council minutes published? Summaries of staff meetings.
- Transparency is really important in the big picture here.

APPENDIX D
REFORMING CORE VALUES, STRATEGIC FOCUS,
AND STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

Core Values, Strategic Focus and Strategic Priorities of Colonial Church⁴⁴⁴

As developed by the ReForming Visioning Team and affirmed by the Church Council, August 21, 2018

Five Core Values

The following five core values were discerned through an intentional process of prayer, listening (to God and our congregation), and earnest deliberation. We believe them to encompass our identity and calling in this next season of our life together. The sentences following each value provide detail but are also dynamic and therefore subject to modification as we live them out together.



WELCOME BELOVED

We are each beloved and welcomed unconditionally by God. In turn, having been loved and welcomed, we strive to love and welcome all people no matter what. At the same time, God's love is an invitation to transformation. We are loved as we are, but we're never left to stay that way. To encounter Jesus is to be changed.



RISK TOGETHER THE MESSY PATH OF FAITH

Following Jesus entails risk. We must die to ourselves for the sake of new life, forgive expecting nothing in return, trust God when all hope seems lost, and take up a cross to follow Christ who for us is the way, the truth and the life (Mark 8:34; John 14:6). We do not risk alone. We have each other and the courage and conviction of God's Spirit.



WRESTLE WITH THE TENSIONS IN GOD'S WORD & WORLD

As finite and flawed humans, we necessarily struggle with the teaching of Scripture, with God's call to righteousness and with life in our troubled and complex world. Yet wrestling makes us honest, open and vulnerable toward God and others. Our doubts and struggles are material for deeper spiritual growth.



IMMERSE IN SACRED SPACES & RHYTHMS

There are places, traditions and particular practices of faith and worship wherein we tangibly encounter the holy and living God. Regular immersion in such places and practices forms and reforms us in line with the good and acceptable and perfect will of God (Romans 12:1-2). In these transcendent places and moments, we experience realities larger than ourselves and realize the fullness faith in Christ makes possible.



DO GOOD FOR CHRIST'S SAKE

Jesus said you will know a tree by its fruit (Luke 6:44). While you can do nothing to earn your salvation or God's love, you must do something to show you've received it. We live out the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22) in our church and families, at work and in our neighborhoods, even to the ends of the earth. Together as church, we encourage and identify giftedness, train, equip and collaborate in service to the world as Christ.

Strategic Focus

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The strategic focus is a guide for leadership decision-making. It derives from our core values.

CULTIVATE A DEEPLY RELATIONAL COMMUNITY AND CROSS THE GAPS THAT DIVIDE.

“To cultivate” taps into the Hebrew word meaning to till, serve, work or worship. The Lord gave the first humans paradise of Eden to *cultivate* and keep (Gen. 2:15). As people made in God’s image, we are invited to participate in God’s work in the world. Jesus picks up on this imagery with his parable of the sower. Seeds sown in cultivated soil yield a hundredfold return (Mark 4:20).

To “cultivate a deeply relational community” prioritizes the practice of love, kindness, honesty, forgiveness and grace—every element of strong relationship—for the sake of personal well-being and rich community. But deep relational community is not an end in itself. Our expectation is for deep community to yield a hundredfold return of good fruit for the world.

Among this fruit is the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-20), and thus the commitment to *cross the gaps that divide*. As a noun, the *cross* sits at the center of our faith, symbolizing both the costly love of Christ as well as the cost of following Christ. As a verb, *to cross* implies the movement we must make in order to engage and embrace, to confront and speak truth, to love and to reconcile. Such movement mirrors Jesus’ movement toward us to reconcile us to God.

Therefore, as a church, we will promote programs and practices that cultivate a deeply relational community and cross the gaps that divide, be they personal, social, theological, political or cultural.

Strategic Priorities

Because we cannot do everything, we seek to do those things which we value and for which we are primarily gifted and called. These priorities will increase in specificity over time as leadership and congregation prayerfully plan for the future. The initial six priorities fall into two categories, “breathe in” and “breathe out.” Breath is a prominent symbol (and reality) in Scripture for the Holy Spirit and for life itself.

Breathe In

- **One Body.** Infuse our five core values into all aspects of Colonial’s life so that everyone knows and feels connected to our identity and calling.
- **Spiritual Growth.** Generate pathways for healing, equipping, forming and educating disciples with Scripture and by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- **Creation.** Foster beauty in all we do to experience the fullness of God.

Breathe Out

- **Engagement.** Leverage our individual and collective resources and strengths to participate innovatively in God’s restorative work.
- **Intergenerational Relationships.** Develop and strengthen meaningful relationships between people of differing ages, stages and life experiences.
- **Social Justice.** Confront social injustice to transform hearts and minds.

APPENDIX E
BUILDING BRIDGES TO OUR FUTURE



COLONIALCHURCH

“What does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God”
(Micah 6:8)

“. . . for I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth and light
yet to break forth from His holy Word”
(*Farewell Discourse of the Rev. John Robinson*)

Introduction

To be the church is to be a people on the move. Through the power of the Spirit, God calls the church together, builds up the community, and then sets the community on the path of discipleship which inevitably leads out into the world where the living Christ is already present as the source of love, truth, and life who animates the whole inhabited earth. Like her Lord, the church-community ultimately does not exist for herself; rather, she exists to be a true and good neighbor, and a genuine witness in word and deed to the love of God revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The image of journeying together with God and one another is deeply rooted in our own Congregational history and identity. When the early Congregationalists in England and New England gathered together, they did so with the expectation that our God is a living God with a word to speak to the community in the here and now. As John Robinson, the pastor of the Leiden separatist community from which the early Pilgrims would come said, “for I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth from His holy word.”¹ The word that the early Congregationalists expected to hear was one that was meant to guide, enliven, correct, and

¹ As quoted in Gaius Glenn Atkins & Frederick L. Fagley, *History of American Congregationalism* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1942), 60.

move the community forward and out into the world to love and serve their neighbors in places⁴⁴⁸ with which they were as yet profoundly unfamiliar.²

To be a true and good neighbor and genuine witness to God's love requires many things, including the commitment to listen, learn, to seek the guidance of the Spirit of God, and to be willing to be creative and faithful in response to God's leading. And from time to time, it is good for a congregation to take stock of how effective it is in its service to God in the world in which it lives. The reason for this is that the social context in which congregations find themselves are constantly evolving, as are the spoken and unspoken needs and challenges of the time.

Colonial Church recently went through such a process, which was called ReForming. The central question of this process was: "What is God calling us to next?" The process included extensive reflection by church leadership, a detailed congregational survey and multiple listening sessions for interaction between the congregation and leadership, as well as preaching themes and other opportunities to discern together the next chapter into which God is calling our community.

The results of this process included the articulation of five distinct Core Values, of which are comprised: 1) Welcome, Beloved; 2) Risk Together the Messy Path of Faith; 3) Wrestle with the Tensions in God's Word and World; 4) Immerse in Sacred Spaces and Rhythms; and 5) Do Good, for Christ's Sake. The ordering of the values was deliberate, beginning with "Welcome, Beloved," and ending with "Do Good, for Christ's Sake." ReForming offered the opportunity for the community together to collectively discern its strengths and challenges, and to begin the process of reimagining how our congregation was going to show up in the world.

² See Arthur A. Rouner, Jr., *The Congregational Way of Life* (Oak Creek, WI: Congregational Press, 1972).

How shall we show up in the world?

With the energy and direction initiated by the ReForming process, and in keeping with the deepest impulses of our Congregational tradition, our congregation has continued the ongoing work of collective reimagining so that we can continue to be effective in our service to God in our neighborhoods and communities and beyond. As a part of this work, the congregation unanimously called Rev. Jeff Lindsay as our Senior Minister in February of 2020, energized by his vision to join with God who is doing a new thing in our midst through prayer, and missional re-alignment in this next season. In addition to a long history of loving Christ and this community, Jeff has brought with him a set of ministry priorities to invest in our future together with Christ, the community, lay leadership, and staff.

One key development in building this future is the creation of an alternative worship service. Notwithstanding the limitations we have encountered as our community and the larger world has grappled with the COVID-19 virus, the alternative worship service has launched and experienced significant success. The alternative format has provided a space for many people within our community and beyond, to connect with our congregation, to hear God speak in a medium that feels more familiar than a more traditional format, and to feel genuinely welcome, seen, and loved.

A second development has been reconceptualizing Youth and Children's ministry. This area in the life of the church was given a significant priority by our new Senior Minister and has seen a major investment through new hires and staffing changes. The overall goal is to create a seamless experience for emerging generations: children, youth, and emerging adults.

A third development which was especially sidelined by the outbreak of COVID-19, was to reimagine what it means for us to be a missional community and re-engage more deeply so

that we might “Do Good for Christ’s Sake.” In addition to tangible efforts like featuring ministries of the month, we are seeking to be intentional about ways that the campus of our community might become a missional hub for good in our neighborhood as we seek to love and serve the community around us, further helping us live into our value of “Welcome, Beloved.”

Every congregation is faced with the question of how they will show up or be a presence in the wider world. How are we perceived as we pursue the commission that Jesus has called us to? What are the roadblocks that keep us from being more effective as followers of Jesus and people who want to love our neighbors? Here too, our congregation’s work of discernment through the ReForming process highlights the need to embrace and courageously live into our first Core Value of “Welcome, Beloved.”

This has become all the more pressing in light of transformations happening in our society, especially in regard to racial injustice. The murder of George Floyd in late May by a member of the Minneapolis Police Department left our communities, the nation, and even the wider world in a state of shock, anger, and bewilderment. While the uprisings and unrest that have followed are in part a response to the events surrounding Mr. Floyd’s death, they are rooted in a much longer history, one with which our congregation and communities are only beginning to grapple. Nevertheless, a longing to be a people who are committed to Jesus’ vision of God’s shalom and to be a congregation that truly does mean all are welcome has led many to commit themselves to trying to understand the dynamics of racial injustice in our world and community, and to trying to find ways to rectify them.

The present cultural moment offers a significant opportunity to learn and consider how we want to show up in a world that for many people is turned upside down. Recognition of this

significant moment has also led to a felt need to revisit a conversation which has been going on⁴⁵¹ in our congregation among laity and leadership for some time, regarding the name “Colonial.”

Before delving further into consideration of our name, it is important to pause so as to ground ourselves by naming how our faith in Jesus is the animating force behind our consideration of a name change as we seek to grow in Christ and serve our world through loving God and our neighbors as ourselves, bearing witness to the good news of Jesus.

What does the Lord Require of You?

As we consider how to move out into the world and to inhabit our core value of “Welcome, Beloved” a useful text for thinking about our way forward may be found in Micah 6:8: “God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” This passage appears in a section where the prophet Micah is asking the question: “What does proper worship of God actually look like?” God’s answer comes in the succinct statement that we are called to seek justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. What might these three aspects have to say about our congregation’s Core Value of “Welcome, Beloved” in light of the question of a name change?

1) Doing Justice

It is interesting that doing justice is the first thing that the prophet mentions. It’s not offering more incense or better sacrifices or better unleavened bread. In fact, the prophet recites those options in the verses just preceding verse 8. What God wants is not *things*, but our very *lives*. God wants us to turn and, for starters, do justice.

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Doing justice carries with it the idea of actively pursuing something, and that something is equity for all. In the broader biblical witness, justice often carries with it the sense of creating the conditions for a flourishing life. It refers to God's "burning compassion for the oppressed. . . . His being merciful, compassionate."³ In the context of Micah, this understanding of justice is even more pronounced as the prophet recounts time and again the abuses that were occurring in Israel: "The powerful oppress the powerless (2:1-2, 8-9; 3:1-3, 9-10), laborers are exploited (3:10), courts are corrupt (3:11)."⁴ This dismal picture offers the contrast against which the life of discipleship is worked out: "To do justice means to work for the establishment of equity for all, especially for the powerless."⁵ The command to do justice places our common life in the center as we are called to seek communal and social arrangements which make it possible for all people to access the flourishing life that God intends.

In view of this command, "Welcome, Beloved" means working, through God's Spirit, to make our community as welcoming as possible by removing unnecessary barriers for people so that they can join in the pilgrimage of faith to which God calls all people. Furthermore it means allowing our common life of welcome that we already seek to live into to truly inform how we are present in the world, a world that is in dire need of love and justice.

2) *Loving Kindness*

The second command is also deeply rooted in the vision of the prophets and reinforces the basic thrust of the first command. "Kindness" here is a translation of the potent Hebrew word *Hesed*, which can also be translated as mercy, love, steady love, and kindness. It is above all associated with God. What it conveys is a sense of active and loyal love. In other words, in

³ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: HarperOne Publications, 2001), 256-257.

⁴ James Limburg, *Hosea—Micah* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press), 192.

⁵ *Ibid.*

keeping with the command to do justice, God is not merely interested in our having an emotional⁴⁵³ connection to God, but in our deep, deep commitment and loyalty to God and to our neighbor, which is made apparent by actions of care.

To love kindness then is to place care for others at the center, for the verb used here for “love” carries a sense of active engagement or seeking. It means, “to practice a life of reliable solidarity,”⁶ wherein the question we find ourselves asking is not “who is my neighbor?” but “am I being a neighbor to all whom I meet?”

Our commitment to be a welcoming congregation clearly aligns with, and receives added vigor, from the command to “love kindness.” It calls us to recognize the ways in which we can and should be in solidarity with everyone we encounter, especially with individuals and communities that have suffered historic and ongoing injustice.

3) *Walk Humbly with Your God*

“Walk humbly”—both of these words are important. To “walk” is a Hebrew word closely connected to living an ethical life, and to going on a journey. In the Christian tradition it takes on the connotation of discipleship, “walking after” Jesus or taking the Jesus way.⁷ The command then reiterates the basic pursuits of justice and kindness, but now brings in the word “humble.” They way that we are called to pursue justice and to love kindness is in humility.

The word here for “humility” only appears one other time in the Hebrew Bible (Proverbs 11:2). Scholars note that it is best understood in contrast to pride, arrogance, and shame, all of which are associated with being self-centered. Thus, to be humble is to be attentive to the other, to be cognizant that one is, “on the path with them, to be in relation to them and with reference to

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, “Walk Humbly with Your God: Micah 6:8,” *Journal for Preachers* 33/4 (Pentecost, 2010): 14.

⁷ See James Limburg, *Hosea—Micah* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press), 192-93.

them on the way.”⁸ Micah indicates who the primary companion on our journey will be: God.⁴⁵⁴ But, the whole of Micah makes clear who this God is: the God of justice and kindness. Thus, our journey is with God and all those whom God also is seeking out and traveling with, all those to whom God is seeking to extend justice and kindness.

It would seem then that our value of “Welcome, Beloved” deeply aligns with the call that we hear from Micah. These considerations, wedded with the call to both make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20) and to be reconcilers (2 Corinthians 5:11-21), animates our quest to consider the missional challenges of our current name.

What is “Colonial” meant to acknowledge or represent?

With roots going back to 1902, Colonial Church was founded in 1946 in the Country Club district of Edina. The descriptor “Colonial” is, in the context of the United States, above all associated with the early settler period, generally dated from the mid-sixteenth century up to the founding of the Republic in 1789.

Given this range of time, and based on other unique aspects in our congregation, there are two significant factors that the name was meant to convey when first chosen.⁹ The primary reason for choosing “Colonial” for the church’s name was to connect the church to the Puritan and Pilgrim traditions from which the Congregational tradition springs. The Colonial era is generally understood to name the time frame during which the English religious refugees came over to the North American continent.

⁸ Brueggemann, “Walk Humbly with Your God: Micah 6:8,” 16.

⁹ A brief comment by Rev. Kenneth E. Seim, the founding minister of the church, supports this analysis. See *The Colonial Church of Edina: A Look at Fifty Years 1946-1996*, written and edited by Lorelei Bergman, Lois Collins, and Jan Moe, (Edina: Colonial Church, 1996), 2.

The Protestant reformation in England took a unique pathway beginning in 1532 when⁴⁵⁵ Henry VIII chose to break away from the Roman Catholic Church. For a variety of political, social, and theological reasons, Henry and his successors wound up producing a church form that retained many aspects of Catholic doctrine and practice, while including some key Reformation principles. This compromise did not sit well with everyone in England, particularly those shaped by the theology of John Calvin in Geneva. These groups identified themselves as Puritans or Pilgrims. Some of them wanted to reform the church from within, while others wanted to separate themselves.

By the early 17th century, persecution of both Puritans and Pilgrims led many to flee as refugees to areas in North America which were being explored by the English. The first Royal Charter issued to the Pilgrims was in 1620, which marks the date of their departure and settlement near what is now called Plymouth, Massachusetts. It is this tradition, and the later developments associated with the Puritans, Boston, and wider New England, which are the root of the Congregational tradition to which the name “Colonial” is meant to refer.

The tradition is highlighted in a variety of ways in our congregation, including the naming of various rooms in our church after key figures among the early Puritans, hanging a copy of the Mayflower Compact in the Commons, and the physical layout and architectural style of our building, which draws directly from the New England style churches for which the Puritans were famously known.

The second reason that the name was chosen is also rooted in the Colonial era. With the end of WWII, the desire to reaffirm many of the best aspects of the American democratic tradition would have been palpable in 1946 when our church was founded. Our congregation has a longstanding history not only of celebrating its religious heritage, but also some of the key

aspects of the American democratic tradition. Naming one of the rooms in our building after ⁴⁵⁶ Abigail Adams, wife of the second president of the United States John Adams, as well as hanging copies of the Declaration of Independence, the US Constitution, and the Bill of Rights in the Commons are all unique expressions of the desire to honor the best aspects of the American democratic tradition.

Why might “Colonial” cause concern now?

The meanings and associations of words or descriptors can sometimes shift over time. And that is certainly the case with the word “colonial.” Notwithstanding the initial desires of the congregation back in 1946, “Colonial” doesn’t just name a specific historical era, nor does it speak only about the Puritan migration or later evolution of the American democratic republic. It has, rather, especially come to be associated with the political-economic dynamics by which events unfolded in the early modern period, events which proved to have disastrous consequences for everyone involved, especially for communities of color and native or indigenous peoples. This is often named under the descriptor: *colonialism*.

The word colonialism is meant to name the historical and political-economic processes and events of exploration, exploitation, dispossession, enslavement, oppression, under-development, and eventually dependency which occurred as European powers encountered other peoples and lands from the 15th up into the 20th century, when decolonization began. Furthermore, the association of colonialism with these historical events of exploitation and abuse is not just a matter of academic debate—the average person in our current time and context often makes similar connections.

I. Colonialism as a Historical Phenomenon:

Overall there are three significant processes/systems with which colonialism has come to be connected: 1) the genocide of native peoples and dispossession of their land; 2) the creation of the modern slave system and the construction of racial hierarchy to justify it; and 3) the engagement with cultures, peoples and lands in Africa and Asia which have resulted in an asymmetrical relationship of dependency.

Before we turn to each of these examples, we should point out that many of the practices and policies which formed the bedrock of colonialism were initially pioneered within the European context itself, against other Europeans. Beginning in the 12th century the Irish found themselves subjected to the ambitions of the English king, Henry II, who with the help of the Catholic Church claimed he had a right and responsibility to rule over Ireland and its people. Similar events also occurred in eastern Europe, notably Lithuania and other Slavic lands in the waning of the Middle Ages.¹⁰ Many of these events, though unique, included a similar dynamic—take control of the natural resources, subjugate the local population, and extract wealth, typically through cheap or free manual labor. This same process was eventually reproduced on a much larger scale, and with a much greater toll on human life, in the Atlantic basin.

1) *Genocide and Dispossession of Native Lands*

The arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492 on the island of Hispaniola was indeed a world altering event.¹¹ Unfortunately, it had disastrous consequences for indigenous peoples

¹⁰ See Robert Miller, et al, *Discovering Indigenous Lands: The Doctrine of Discovery in the English Colonies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 9-10; see also, James A. Froude, *The English in Ireland*, 3 vols. (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, 1874).

¹¹ “Francisco López de Gómara, biographer of Hernán Cortés, . . . described the “discovery” of the Americas as, “the greatest event since the creation of world except for the birth and death of our Savior. That is why

across the Americas. Whether through disease, plague, enslavement, famine, or war, the population was decimated. As one scholar has noted: “It will be recalled that in 1500 the world population is approximately 400 million, of whom 80 million live in the Americas. By the middle of the sixteenth century, out of these 80 million, there remain ten.”¹²

The depopulation of the Americas was accompanied by European claims to possess and control sovereignty over the lands which they “discovered.” In the context of North America this was carried out through the development of a legal doctrine known as the “Doctrine of Discovery.” The Discovery Doctrine has several roots in European history, the most relevant of which were the Roman Catholic Church’s attempt to settle disputes between Spain and Portugal regarding which areas in the Americas should be allowed to be explored, settled, and dominated by either country. In 1493, Pope Alexander VI issued the first of a series of legal declarations which effectively split the Americas into two spheres to be dominated by Spain and Portugal. This was done without the knowledge or consent of the native peoples living in those lands.¹³

Over time, the Doctrine of Discovery evolved to include three significant aspects: right of sovereignty, right of use, and right of residence. The various Royal Charters issued to potential settlers—whether of Spanish, Portuguese, French, Dutch, or English origin—included these distinctions and their attendant provisions. New settlers could possess a given area provided it was not already controlled by “another Christian prince.”¹⁴ Native peoples retained the rights to

they call it the New World,” (Christian T. Collins Winn & Amos Yong, “The Apocalypse of Colonialism; Or, Notes Towards a Postcolonial Eschatology,” in *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Global Awakenings in Theology and Praxis*, ed. Smith, et al (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 141.

¹² Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 133.

¹³ See Miller, *Discovering Indigenous Lands*, 10-15; see also Steven T. Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2008); and Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah, *Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery* (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press, 2019).

¹⁴ See *ibid.*, 18-19.

use the land, and to reside on the land, but they were no longer the true sovereign of their lands.⁴⁵⁹

This fact becomes clear under the concept of preemption. Preemption refers to the fact that if a tribe or native group wished to sell their lands, they could only sell to the European power who had “discovered” the land, or who held the sovereignty of the land through the right of Discovery. The privilege of preemption made plain that the native peoples did not ultimately control their land because they could not sell it to whomever they wished. As colonists multiplied, the right of preemption made it possible for land to be bought at very cheap prices, or simply to be taken through further conquest.

Over time, this doctrine became the basis for Native American law in the United States through a series of legal rulings, the most significant of which was *Johnson vs. M’Intosh* (1823). Chief Justice Marshall summed up the position which the US government would pursue through the 19th century up into the middle of the 20th, which was that, “discovery gave an exclusive right to extinguish the Indian title of occupancy, either through purchase or by conquest . . .”¹⁵

Thankfully there have been some changes in regard to government engagement with indigenous populations in the United States; nevertheless, the Doctrine of Discovery continues to have a brutal legacy with ongoing repercussions.

2) *The Creation of the Slave Economy and the Construction of Racial Hierarchy to Justify It*

The second major dynamic with which colonialism is associated is the creation of the slave economy which came to dominate the Americas well up into the 19th century, as well as the development of the concept of race and racial hierarchy which was used to justify the exploitation especially of African and indigenous peoples.

¹⁵ As quoted in Miller, et al, *Discovering Indigenous Lands*, 56.

Most people have some familiarity with the history of slavery in the United States.

Though slavery has ancient roots, the form of chattel slavery which evolved in the United States and other parts of the Americas was unique in its barbarism. It was also central to the colonial enterprise. “Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, a period that roughly coincides with the colonial periods of North and South America, nearly thirteen million Africans were enslaved and shipped west across the Atlantic, while two to four million Native Americans were enslaved and traded by European colonists in America. In fact, though, this pairing was no coincidence. Slavery and colonization went hand in hand. . . . It was a deadly symbiosis.”¹⁶

The tie that bound slavery and colonialism together was economics. “With the limited population of Europe in the sixteenth century, the free laborers necessary to cultivate the staple crops of sugar, tobacco and cotton in the New World could not have been supplied in quantities adequate to permit large-scale production. Slavery was necessary for this, and to get slaves the Europeans turned first to the aborigines and then to Africa.”¹⁷ Both the northern and southern colonies were entangled in the slave economy and the slave trade, which became key planks for the success of the colonial enterprise.¹⁸ Early on, even poor whites or Europeans who were indentured were also put to work, with at least 10,000 coming from Bristol, England alone between 1654-1685.¹⁹ As the Atlantic slave trade developed, however, the trade coalesced around the exploitation of African men and women, who had to endure deadly and dehumanizing

¹⁶ Wendy Warren, *New England Bound: Slavery and Colonization in Early America* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2016), 1.

¹⁷ Eric Williams, *Capitalism & Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1944), 6; For a discussion of Native American enslavement, see Andrés Reséndez, *The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016).

¹⁸ See Marc Howard Ross, *Slavery in the North: Forgetting History and Recovering Memory* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015); and Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

¹⁹ See Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 9-10.

conditions both on the Middle Passage from Africa to the New World and when they eventually⁴⁶¹ arrived in the Caribbean or North America.²⁰ The trade can only be described as the systematic attempt, “to capture and commodify other people.”²¹

There were many, however, both in North America and Europe who objected to the slave trade, which was often called “man stealing.”²² As such, a theoretical justification was required. This came in the form of the burgeoning theory of race and racial hierarchy. Thus, “Slavery was not born of racism: rather, racism was the consequence of slavery.”²³ 1619 is typically the date cited for the beginning of the slave trade in North America with the arrival of 20 Angolan slaves in Virginia. Over the course of the 17th century, several laws were enacted in the English colonies²⁴ which effectively combined phenotype or skin-color with slave or subhuman status. These laws stripped people of African descent of many of their rights, whether they were free or enslaved, including the notion that Christian baptism could change the status of life-long enslavement, a particular fear of plantation owners.²⁵ To be black, then, was in some sense to be associated with the odium of being a slave.

These early laws and the practices which accompanied them became the basis for egregious claims made later regarding the humanity of people of color. One such instance, with Minnesota ties, was the infamous Dred Scott case of 1857, in which the then Chief Justice Roger

²⁰ See Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); and Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*.

²¹ Warren, *New England Bound*, 113.

²² See, for instance, John Wesley, *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, 4th ed. (Dublin: W. Whitestone, 1775); for an extensive history of abolitionism see Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

²³ Williams, *Capitalism & Slavery*, 7.

²⁴ See *Africans in America: Colonial Laws*, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1h315.html> (accessed 7/23/20, 4:50 pm).

²⁵ See Jon Sensbach, *Rebecca’s Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

Taney argued that people of African descent do not share the same protections or privileges as Euro-Americans found in the Constitution, simply because they were black.²⁶ 462

Even with the Civil War and the ending of racial slavery, racism has persisted and evolved in a number of different ways, though one of its persistent results has been to place people of color in situations of profound vulnerability and to continue to distort and dehumanize people of color and Euro-Americans alike.

3) *The Engagement with Cultures and Peoples in Africa and Asia which Placed Those Peoples at a Distinct Disadvantage in Relation to Western Powers and an Asymmetrical Relationship of Dependency*

The last phenomenon with which colonialism is associated is sometimes described as imperialism in an attempt to mark it off from the earlier colonial era. However, it exhibits many of the same basic dynamics of exploitation and was experienced as colonization in places like Africa and Asia. It refers to a series of exploitative ventures which happened in the 19th century which resulted in 90% of the world coming under some form of European rule.²⁷ In this case, European powers didn't typically attempt to colonize a given area through dispatching settlers but sought rather to assert political and economic power and social control through military might and other means.

Among the other means was an ideological sense of certainty of the inferiority of people of color in other lands, and the desire to spread "western civilization." "Colonial and imperial rule was legitimized by anthropological theories which increasingly portrayed peoples of the

²⁶ See Paul Finkelman (ed.), *Dred Scott v. Sandford: A Brief History with Documents*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin, 2016).

²⁷ "This division between the rest and the west was made fairly absolute in the 19th century by the expansion of the European empires, as a result of which nine-tenths of the entire land surface of the globe was controlled by Europeans, or European-derived, powers" (Robert C. J. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003], 2).

colonized world as inferior, childlike, or feminine, incapable of looking after themselves (despite⁴⁶³ having done so perfectly well for millennia) and requiring the paternal rule of the west for their own best interests.”²⁸ Unfortunately, as has been shown over time, the work of development actually created relationships of dependency, and was often little more than another form of disguised exploitation.

The situation was especially egregious in places like Africa, from which European countries would extract raw materials, through underpaid local labor, most of whom were deliberately undereducated since the only jobs generally available or open to them were forms of menial labor. Once the raw materials were extracted, they were then shipped home to Europe where they were transformed into goods in factories that generally offered relatively stable and well-paying manufacturing jobs. Then, once the goods were produced and refined, they were often sent back to the African market (as well as other markets), even though they were typically out of reach of the average African worker because they did not make enough money.²⁹

Thankfully, this form of colonialism only lasted for about 70 years and came to an end in the mid-20th century. Nevertheless, the relationships of dependency begun in the 19th century continue, such that Western countries are the primary beneficiaries in their relationships with countries in places like Africa, Latin America, and Asia at the expense of those other countries.

II. Colonialism in the Popular Imagination

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ “What did colonial governments do in the interest of Africans? Supposedly, they built railroads, schools, hospitals, and the like. The sum total of these services was amazingly small. . . . Indeed, what was called ‘the development of Africa’ by the colonialists was a cynical short-hand expression for ‘the intensification of colonial exploitation in Africa to develop capitalist Europe’” (Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, rev. ed. [Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1981], 205, 223).

That colonialism continues to be associated with these three broad historical and political-economic forms of exploitation is not just an academic debate or something that is discussed in the media. The following quotes come from individuals who live in the Twin Cities region, but who are either not currently associated with our community, or who have some loose connection. The quotes come from both our white neighbors and neighbors of color, people who are of varied ages, political and spiritual persuasions. Their responses are generally indicative of the broader perception of the name “Colonial.” Their responses were given to the question:

“What do you think of when you hear ‘colonial’?”

- “I think of colonization. I think of colonial rule which is power rooted in controlling and taking....dehumanizing...” Genevieve, 25
- “A country is under the control of another”- Richard, 63
- “I think of a bunch of white colonists, likely carting slaves, with an out of date world view. Colonialism at its core assumes superiority of world view. It assumes there’s a lesser culture or human who must be guided by smarter, most likely white, rulers”- Michael, 29
- “The word has changed meaning over the past few decades. To ‘colonize’ means to wipe out what is there before. In 2020, it comes across as outdated and arrogant. It sounds culturally tone deaf.”- Thomas, 51
- “I think of someone/something in power exerting their power over someone/something weaker.”- Joy, 43
- “When I hear colonial, I think of past and continued colonization of indigenous people”- Julie, 33
- “When I hear the word colonial I think of colonization and loss of power, land, and culture. I immediately think white people.”- Vanessa, 28
- “Old, conservative, Southern, imperialist”- Todd, 55
- “When I think of the word 'colonial,' I think of an oppressive system that enslaved millions of people, not just in the US but across the globe, by white Europeans in order to steal land and resources from indigenous people. It still exists today in the US through mass incarceration and other systems.” - Anna, 30
- “It just makes me think of a verrrrry white space that has not even begun to do the decolonizing work that will make the space even remotely safe for my Black self. if anything, it sounds proud of a colonial (aka violent as hell) legacy. So it's a giant nope for me” - Anonymous, 27

It is worth noting here that purpose of the present paper is neither to affix blame nor to offer absolution for the history of violence associated with colonialism recounted in brief above.

It is rather to raise the question of whether our use of the name “Colonial” impedes our mission⁴⁶⁵ to serve our world, to share the gospel of God’s reign with everyone in word and deed, and to be a community that welcomes in line with Micah 6:8, reliably standing in solidarity with our neighbors as a logical consequence of the call to follow Jesus.

If the descriptor “Colonial” is not only historically speaking associated with a history which Christians would rightly abhor, and if that descriptor offers a significant stumbling block to people who might otherwise join our community, and if keeping the name is interpreted by many as perpetuating a history with which we would not otherwise want to be associated, then perhaps it is time to consider a different name. One that keeps with our Congregational history, but which doesn’t carry the historical burdens and connotations of the word “Colonial.”

Keeping in Step with Our Congregationalist Tradition

To consider changing the name of our church at this moment is deeply consonant with the spirit of innovation in the Congregational tradition which has animated our congregation from its inception.

Though Congregationalists and the Congregational tradition was certainly entangled in the history of colonialism, some of the loudest voices who protested mistreatment of native peoples, dispossession of lands, slavery, racism, and foreign domination, have come out of Congregationalism.

As noted above, when the Pilgrim’s came over to the small settlement at Plymouth, they embarked with a sense of expectation that God’s Word and Spirit still speak. In his farewell address, John Robinson had encouraged those who were about to make the journey to be prepared to receive new light since more truth and light were, “yet to break forth from His holy

word.”³⁰ This sense of anticipation and free thinking have been central to the Congregational⁴⁶⁶ tradition, sometimes even causing divisions among Congregationalists.

One such division occurred during the period of the Great Awakening when Jonathan Edwards argued that the revival of religion happening within his own town and congregation was the work of God.³¹ It may seem strange to some, but many Congregationalists opposed this idea. The two sides actually split into two factions within the towns and congregations scattered across New England, sometimes leading to permanent splits.³² The two sides were generally called Old Light Congregationalists (anti-revival) and New Light Congregationalists (pro-revival). Though these splits were unfortunate, they highlight the dynamism within Congregationalism produced by the spirit of innovation and the ongoing desire to attend to the new ways in which God is at work in the church and the world.

The need to listen for how God is at work in the world has also at times produced a significant social witness within our tradition. For instance, in 1776 Samuel Hopkins, a student of Jonathan Edwards, added his voice to that of the Quakers and other black abolitionists when he preached a sermon on Isaiah 1:15, titled “This Whole Country Have Their Hands Full of Blood This Day.”³³ The sermon was a broadside attack on slavery and the slave trade. It began a history of significant participation in the abolitionist movement by Congregationalists like

³⁰ Atkins & Fagley, *History of American Congregationalism*, 60.

³¹ See his 1753 pamphlet, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in A Jonathan Edwards Reader*, ed. by John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P Minkema (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 57-87.

³² See Edwin Scott Gaustad, *A Religious History of America*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), 57-61.

³³ See ‘*This whole country have their hands full of Blood this day*’: *Transcription and Introduction of an Antislavery Sermon Manuscript Attributed to the Reverend Samuel Hopkins*, ed. by Jonathan Sassi (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 2004).

Lemuel Haynes, Theodore Weld, Lewis Tappan, and Henry Ward Beecher.³⁴ The Congregationalist commitment to a democratic spirit in religious and social life spread out far beyond the bounds of the church and became important in other areas like the inclusion of women in ministry and the political life of the nation, the care for the poor and economic justice, concern for human and civil rights, and participation in the peace movement, among others.³⁵ For instance, it was the Congregational Church at South Butler, New York, that took the extraordinary step in 1853 of ordaining and calling as their pastor Antoinette Brown, making her the first woman ordained to the ministry of the pulpit by a Protestant denomination.³⁶

Likewise, our own congregation has also been open to the spirit of innovation in significant ways. For instance, in the tumultuous period of the late 1960s and early 1970s, our congregation made concerted efforts to build significant relationships with major African American churches in the Twin Cities through pulpit sharing, and through the invitation of nationally recognized speakers like Civil Rights leaders Howard Thurman and William E. Pannell.

During the 1960s the congregation became the first church in the state of Minnesota to hire a full-time minister devoted solely to Youth Ministry and developed several pioneering ministries with youth around the Twin Cities. During the height of the Vietnam war, the church created space both for those who wanted to serve in the military and for conscientious objectors.

³⁴ See Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition*; Donald W. Dayton, *Rediscovering an Evangelical Heritage: A Tradition of Integrating Piety and Justice*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014); Douglas M. Strong, *Perfectionist Politics: Abolitionism and the Religious Tensions of American Democracy* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999); and Timothy Smith, *Revival and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957).

³⁵ See Atkins & Fagley, *History of American Congregationalism*, 246-264; Barbara Brown Zikmund (ed.), *Hidden Histories in the United Church of Christ* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1984); and Charles Chatfield, "The Bible and American Peace Movements," in *The Bible and Social Reform*, ed. by Ernest R. Sandeen (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1982), 105-132.

³⁶ See Barbara Brown Zikmund, "Biblical Arguments and Women's Place in the Church," in *The Bible and Social Reform*, 85-104.

In the 1970s, the church also began to incorporate the insights of the counseling movement, 468 opening a counseling center which was eventually staffed with several full-time and part-time counselors. More recently, our community sought to leverage the significant social capital within the church and the spirit of social entrepreneurship in our broader region and launched Innové, which has helped to incubate several very successful non-profit ministries, that serve locally and world-wide.

What will this enable us to do?

Embarking on this process of communal self-evaluation means to courageously step into the next chapter of the church with trust in God's guidance and love for our neighbors here and now. Many members of our community would acknowledge a heart's desire for our beloved church to grow and this is a critical step in engaging an entirely new demographic of people. It shows our neighbors and surrounding communities that our church is not culturally tone-deaf and is not committed more to the past than the future, rather, we will be intentionally positioning ourselves as a community of faith who hear the needs of people and respond with love, respect and a gospel that can speak to all people.

Ultimately changing the church's name—a key symbol of who we are and what we are about in the world—further aligns our community's values and vision with our ministries and sacred spaces. As we reimagine music during worship, engagement with emerging generations, and what it means to be mission partners with other groups, we will no longer have to experience the 'moment of hesitation'. That moment when individuals outside of our community hear our church's name and wonder about our intentions, the level of our self-awareness, and the genuineness of our professed love of our neighbor. The validity of these questions seems clear—

why would a church of Christ followers committed to doing good in the world identify themselves with a name that is associated with such a troubling history? If nothing else, choosing a new name allows us the opportunity to more authentically embrace who we want to be and to make this clear to those around us, especially those to whom we want to reach out with the good news of God's love.

What are the potential costs of such a change?

With any change comes the potential cost of fracturing our congregation and losing community members. We have heard it repeatedly said that what makes our congregation special is not so much the building, the name, or even the ministries, as it is the relationships we have built over many years, and the culture of welcome that we have sought to live into. Staff and lay leadership earnestly hope that individual's commitment to the congregation runs deeper than the name. One thing that is quite certain is that changing the name of the congregation will not change what makes the congregation so special.

While we acknowledge that not all members of the church will initially be in favor of such a change, we encourage every person in the congregation to view this process as another opportunity to lean into conversations with one another and embody one of the key components of Congregational culture with the objectives of understanding and learning.

For those who fear the cost being a loss of our history and our connection to our Congregational roots, rest assured the name change proposal has absolutely nothing to do with erasing our past. Rather it's about building upon the richness of our tradition and storied history by best equipping us to doing similar and greater work in the future. Our burning hope and desire is that whatever name we discern God is calling us into will be one that is deeply rooted in our

Congregational identity, rooted in the relationships we have forged over time, rooted in the impulse to serve our neighbors no matter who or where they are. 470

What happens if we do not change the name?

The decision to not change our name would place a significant barrier in front of our community's desire to grow and develop. Retaining a name that is so easily associated with a history with which almost no one either in our community or beyond would want to be associated, places a profound limitation on our ability to capitalize on our current momentum of renewed ministries, reimagined spaces, and commitment to doing good work for the next 75 years and beyond. Our community will bear a significant burden as the need to explain why we have kept the name "Colonial", even after we have deliberated on it, will only grow over time, especially given our stated desire to be a wholeheartedly good neighbor and witness of God's redemptive love. This burden extends to our ministry partners, some of whom already hold reservations regarding our church's name, as well as the potential to have new ministry partners, especially among those groups that are actively working for justice in our neighborhoods.

Finally, in a similar way that changing our name has the potential of losing members, not changing our name may also result in the loss of current members. This fact, added to the clear disadvantage the name presents for new growth, portends a difficult future for our congregation.

Conclusion

Jesus has long been in the business of building bridges and we believe that we are called to follow this Jesus in being bridge builders of hope, reconciliation, justice, kindness, peace, freedom, and love. And as we do this work, we are reminded that we are not alone on the Jesus

way. We are traveling together with God, with one another, and with potentially many, many⁴⁷¹ other partners, communities, and individuals. This truth, and the call to be a people who do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with the God of justice and mercy, places before us the solemn task of considering whether a different name for our community would not better communicate our Core Values, open more doors for ministry, and signal to the wider world that we want to be a healing presence in a hurting world.

We pray for God's guidance, wisdom, presence, and energizing love to lead us into the new future which God is preparing for our congregation, our community, and the wider world.

APPENDIX F
SERMONS (FULL TEXTS)

Sermon Dates, Titles, Text, And Context

<u>Date</u>	<u>Sermon Title</u>	<u>Text</u>	<u>Context</u>
2015_12_27	"On Being Christian"	1 John 4: 7-21	Colonial
2017_12_04	"On Keeping Warm Through the Night"	N/A	MNIPL
2018_01_21	"In Spirit & In Truth"	John 4:1-26	Colonial
2018_01_28	"Faith Embodied"	I Corinthians 12:12-31	Colonial
2018_03_11	"People on Pilgrimage"	Psalms 30	Colonial
2018_03_18	"Invitations"	John 4:1-26	Upper Room
2018_03_29	"Foolishness of the Cross" (w/ Jeff)	I Corinthians 1:18-31	Colonial
2018_04_03	"On Taking Back Our Power"	N/A	MNIPL
2018_04_15	"For They Were Afraid"	Mark 16:1-8	Colonial
2018_05_13	"A Litany for Mother's Day"	N/A	Colonial
2018_06_10	"Breathe In"	Joshua 1:7-9	Colonial
2018_06_17	"Breathe Out"	2 Corinthians 5:16-21	Colonial
2018_08_06	PYRO SERMONS		PYRO
2018_08_12	"Here I Am. Send Me!"	Matthew 25:14-30	Colonial
2018_09_18	"Writing for a Storm: Six Moments of Grief and Resistance"	N/A	MNIPL
2018_10_14	"Wrestle with the Tensions in God's Word & World"	Acts 10:9-22	Colonial
2018_11_11	"To Love (Eros) One's Self"	N/A	Sacred Circle
2018_12_03	"Advent. Day 3. Elizabeth. Bearing New Things"	N/A	Colonial
2018_12_17	Lessons & Carols: The 3rd Lesson	Luke 2:25-35	Colonial
2018_12_24	"Christmas Eve Reflection, Part I"	Isaiah 9:2-7	Colonial
2019_02_10	"Good News in Which You Stand"	I Corinthians 15:1-11	Colonial
2019_02_11	"Rise Up"	I Corinthians 15:12-20	Colonial
2019_03_02	"Ash Wednesday" Scripture Reflection	2 Cor 5	Colonial
2019_04_07	"Closer to Fine"	Psalms 22	Colonial
2019_04_18	"Into Your Hands"	Luke 23:44-49	Colonial
2019_04_21	"The Story to Be Written"	John 21:15-25	Colonial

2019_04_28	"Holding Up Each Other	Exodus 17:8-16	Colonial
2019_06_02	"New Land"	Joshua 1:1-11	Colonial
2019_06_14	"A Litany for Father's Day"	N/A	Colonial
2019_06_30	"And Jesus Said...'I am the Light of the World'"	John 8:12-20	Colonial
2019_07_28	"And Jesus Said...'I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life'"	John 14:1-7	Colonial
2019_08_04	"And Jesus Said...'I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life'"	John 14:1-7	Awaken
2019_08_11	"And Jesus Said...'I am the Vine'"	John 15:1-17	Colonial
2019_09_29	"Strangers in the Land"	Deuteronomy 10:12-22	Colonial
2019_11_24	"On Being a Bad Neighbor"	Genesis 16	Colonial
2019_12_09	"Jordan Matthew Tommerdahl"	N/A	Jordan's Memorial
2019_12_15	Lessons & Carols		Colonial
2020_01_11	"Love Story: Abby & Isaac's Garden + T-Swift Wedding Meditation"		Abby's Wedding
2020_01_19	"The I AM"	Exodus 3:1-15	Colonial
2020_01_26	"On Bodies"	I Corinthians 12:12-31	Colonial
2020_02_26	"Hope Interrupts"	Leviticus 23:1-8	Colonial
2020_03_29	"Hope Interrupts Power"	Zechariah 4:1-7	Colonial
2020_04_10	Good Friday	Mark 15:40-47	Colonial
2020_04_12	"Hope Interrupts Death" (Sunrise Experience)	Matt. 27:45-28:10	Colonial
2020_04_19	"Grace Actually Sees"	Luke 19:1-10	Colonial
2020_05_03	"Grace Actually Makes Us Bold"	Ruth 1:1-14, 18-22	Colonial
2020_05_10	"Grace Actually Restores"	Ruth 2:8-13, 17-23	Colonial
2020_07_05	"Freedom: The Kingdom of Jubilee"	Leviticus 25:8-17	Colonial
2020_07_19	"The Kin-Dom of God"	John 15:12-17	Colonial
2020_08_23	"A New Heaven & A New Earth"	Revelation 21:1-8	Colonial
2020_09_20	"People of the Promise"	Genesis 12:1-9	Colonial
2020_10_04	"God First"	Judges 5:1-13	Colonial
2020_11_08	"Can I Get a Witness?"	Acts 4:1-12	Colonial
2020_11_21	"A Night To Shine: Unmasking Mental Illness"	N/A	Lake Region Hospital Gala

2020_12_06	Advent Reflection: The Wise Man in the Rainbow Coat	Luke 1:30-33	Colonial
2020_12_13	The Law is Love	Luke 10:25-28	Colonial
2020_12_20	Lessons & Carols: The 5th Lesson	John 1:1-14	Colonial
2020_12_21	Advent Reflection: Mary	Luke 2:8-12	Colonial
2021_01_17	Gathered at the Table	I Corinthians 11:17-31	Colonial
2021_02_14	Gathered for the Neighborhood	Ephesians 3:1-10, 14-20	Colonial
2021_02_28	Turning to the Wilderness	Luke 4:1-10	Colonial
2021_03_21	Turning to One Another	John 13:31-35	Colonial
2021_04_11	Finding Rest	Matthew 11:28-30	Colonial
2021_04_18	For the Beauty	Psalms 104:1-6 & 10-24	Colonial
2021_04_25	Annual Report	N/A	Colonial
2021_05_16	Living Thanks	1 Chronicles 16:7-13	Colonial
2021_07_04	What About Us?	Galatians 1:1-9	Colonial
2021_07_18	Live Toward God	Galatians 2:19-3:3	Colonial
2021_08_08	When Faith Came	Galatians 3:23-29	Colonial
2021_08_29	Instructions on Running Well	Galatians 5:7-15	Colonial
2021_09_19	Root to Rise	Psalms 1	Colonial-Alternative
2021_10_24	Hope as Waiting for Birth	Romans 8:22-25	Colonial-Alternative
2021_11_07	Nathan: Living into God's Great Story	2 Samuel 11:27 - 12:15	Colonial-Alternative
2021_11_28	Elizabeth: Living into God's Great Story	Luke 1:39-45,57-58	Colonial
2021_12_05	Joseph: Living into God's Great Story	Matthew 1:18-25	Colonial-Alternative
2022_03_06	The Rhythm of Prayer	Psalms 25:1-7	Colonial-Alternative
2022_03_13	The Rhythm of Prayer	Psalms 25:1-7	Colonial-Alternative
2022_03_20	The Rhythm of Fasting	2 Corinthians 4:16-18; Luke 4:1-4	Colonial-Alternative
2022_03_27	The Rhythm of Fasting	Isaiah 58:3-12	Colonial-Alternative

2022_04_10	The Rhythm of Almsgiving	Luke 19:1-10	Colonial- Alternative
2022_04_17	The Rhythm of Life (Easter)	John 20:1-18	Colonial- Alternative
2022_04_24	The Spirit for All People	Acts 2:1-21	Meetinghouse- Alternative
2022_05_01	Who to Listen To	Acts 5:27-32	Meetinghouse- Traditional
2022_05_08	Waking Up	Acts 9:1-20	Meetinghouse- Alternative



On Being Christian

Sermon by Sara Wilhelm Garbers

1 John 4:7-21

Guest Preacher
December 27, 2015

Beloved let us love one another because love is from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God, whoever does not love does not know God for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way, God sent the only son into the world so that we might live through him. And this is love: that we love God, but that God loved us and sent God sent the son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God, if we love one another God lives in us and God's love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in God and God in us. Because God has given us the Spirit and we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent the son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the son of God and they abide in God. So we have known and believed the love that God has for us.

God is love and those who abide in love, abide in God and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this that we may have boldness on the day of judgment because as God is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishment and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because God first loved us. Those who say, I love God and hate their siblings are liars. For those who do not love a sibling whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their siblings also.

1 John 4:7-21

Well, good morning and welcome to the last Sunday of 2015! Kind of crazy, right?!. Hasn't felt like it could be that late in December. Yet here we are.

I'm so glad to be here with you all this morning. For those of you who don't know, Greg Meland and Linda Rich-Meland (long-time Colonial members) have become adopted family/have adopted us --I'm not sure which way-- my spouse, Andy and myself. So we're so glad to be here with you.

As I was thinking about what I wanted to preach on this morning, I decided that I wanted to talk about *being Christian*. And I wanted to get at it in a particular way: by talking about love and fear and the interplay between the two and how there might be an invitation for all of us as we look towards 2016 regarding how we might live and be as persons who claim the name of Christ.

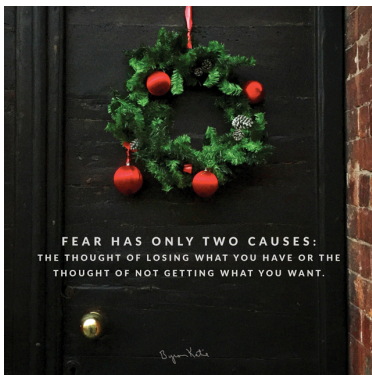
Now, I come to this task as far from the first person to ever preach a sermon on fear, let alone a as who has written or talked about fear before. And so I come to this by way of one of my favorite ethicists, H. Richard Niebuhr. He was a long time professor at Yale and his brother wrote a prayer that many of you may know --The Serenity



Prayer. In the prologue to his book *The Responsible Self* he makes an apologetic for the grounding for his work, that of a Christian moral philosophy. And he says that he's both doing the work of philosophy in thinking about what it means to be human, and he also comes to the work from a particular location—as a person who follows Christ, who conceives of God as he has come to know this God through Christ. And so when we speak about fear and love, it's something that all of us, whether we're thinking about it as people of faith or not, these are things we've all both thought about and lived. And yet today I want to ask us to think about them as we think about what it means to be Christian.¹

My interest in preaching about fear and love doesn't come that out of the blue for me. It finds its grounding in the place where faith was first enlivened to me: John 3:16. And while this passage notes that God's love became embodied to us in Christ, it seems clear that the opposite side of love is fear. I say this because as I was growing up, I lived with a deep sense of fear about God, a fear that even though I affirmed that God loved me, the truth of my lived experience made me believe that God didn't really love me. Maybe some of you have struggled with that same thing: a disconnect from what you mentally affirm and what you actually believe in viewed of your lived experience and pain. Yet what does it mean to have a faith that is rooted deeply in an embodied sense that we are loved? How does love change and transform us?

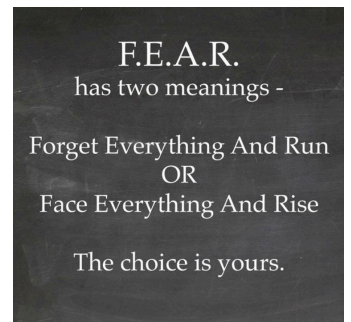
Well, maybe another reason that I came to wanting to preach a sermon about fear and love is because of my work in my doctoral program. Last spring, I wrote a paper with a colleague of mine about the ethics of belief. In it we explored why is it that although we say things like we believe in the golden rule, or we believe in love, we see evidence of the failure of these affirmed beliefs in the way that we actually live our lives.



What is that failing about? How does that come to be? These questions, about the failure of our attested beliefs is what we together considered. One of the themes we took up in our paper was the operation of fear and how it functions to disrupt our ethical praxis. Now, maybe you've read a little bit about fear as there's some wonderful psychology books on this topic, or maybe you've seen some really great social media posts about fear, So here are a few of my favorite Facebook posts about fear that I've seen over the last few weeks. The first notes

that fear has only two causes: the thought of losing what you have or the thought of not getting what you want, fear.

And here's a second: F-E-A-R, forget everything and run (I like that one!) or face everything and rise.



¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, Reprint Edition (Louisville: John Knox, 1999).



Or this one, fear is the mind killer.



Well, one doesn't have to pay too much attention to the news to notice that there's reason to fear. And while I'm not going to spend the sermon talking about all of the various stories that give us reason to fear, we know I could do so, right? For in the wake of the Paris shooting and bombings or the shooting in San Bernardino, there's been an uptick in violence against our Muslim brothers and sisters.

There was a wonderful piece written a few weeks ago by a man named Omar Hamid Al-Rikabi, he starts off, "I have a Muslim problem, I am a Christian pastor in North Texas, I am also the proud son of a Muslim immigrant family from the middle East and I have a very wonderful and large Muslim family..." He continues in his blog post to recount the tension that he himself feels, being both a Christian and a man with a Muslim name, a Muslim family, and a Muslim ethnic identity.²

And he talks about how sometimes in the midst of our fears, we lose the ability to remember that his family and other muslim families like his are wrestling with the same things that non-Muslims do. They have the same questions, such as:

Will my kids grow up and flourish in their life?

Will I leave a legacy that's in line with how I wish to be remembered?

Does he like me? (I hope that guy over there does as his name is Andy and he's my spouse!)

He goes on to say that acts of violence perpetuated by Muslim terrorists, a not reflective of a Muslim problem, but rather tell the story of a human problem. And he says that we need to get our story right because the Gospel of Christ doesn't discount anyone from grace and salvation...even terrorists. For instance, take Paul. I don't know if you remember him, but he seemed to have quite a penchant for killing Christians...and yet he ended up being the author of most of the New Testament. So what is at play when we fall into a space of fear? And what is operative when we don't see one another as human and where love becomes impeded from being lived out in our relationships with One other?

Forgive me for one moment for doing something that I never thought I would do in my life, let alone in a sermon, which is to reference Husserl and speak about phenomenology, Husserl was a philosopher and phenomenologist. Phenomenology is about the study of the phenomenon basically that you see in front of you. And he argued that when we see—that which is before us—that as rational beings we should be able to understand and to apprehend it. I can look at that and I can say, poinsettia

² See: Omar Hamid Al-Rikabi, "My Muslim Problem," Accessed online December 2015. <http://www.omarrikabi.com/my-muslim-problem/#sthash.yDj8VvK2.dpbs>



those are lots of poinsettias, right? That's what they are. I should be able to understand this. However, he leaves open the possibility that we can engage in self-deception which interrupts our ability to rightly encounter the phenomenon, and that this mis-recognition occurs for many reasons.³

One of his students, Edith Stein, furthered his work and wrote at length about the failure of our sight is due to that our empathy becomes blocked. That happens to us and in our world today, right? We're living in this place sometimes that's structured by fear such that fear can actually prevent us from seeing the object or the person who is before us. Our sight thus becomes stymied by a sort of "hermeneutics of fear", meaning we see the world then not as it is, but we see the world through our fear. And when we're in this space, it transforms how we see each other and not for the better, but instead leads us to misapprehend, fear, and even hate one another, allowing for us to dehumanize each other because fear is all we see.⁴

And so today, as we turn our sight toward 2016, having just celebrated Christmas as the time of God giving the greatest gift of love, I wonder: what type of faith will we live in 2016? What type of Christians will we be in this new year? Will we be a people who live in fear or people or will we live as a people who believe that love always wins? Will we be a people who believes that love has come near, that love restores and redeems and transforms even the most broken person or thing?

Will we be shaped by love or by fear, my friends?

One of my favorite films is *Chocolat*. Have any of you seen it? Oh, great- that's a lot of you! That makes me happy. Ok, so here's the thing— I think this movie depicts a really great image for what faith can look like in our times. What I mean by this is that it shows the difference and options of choosing a faith rooted in fear versus one rooted in love. Quick plot summary: a free-spirited woman comes in on the wind to this small French hamlet during Lent...oh, and by the way: she's a chocolatier.⁵ Scandal! Chocolate during lent! As the story goes, in this town where everyone was expected to follow the rules, the mayor is rather peeved that this woman is tempting

³ Husserl's early notion of belief is basically evidentialist. The intending consciousness, given evidence (which is understood to be the experience of agreement between the phenomenon as 'meant' and the phenomenon as given—to say it another way, evidence is the experience of agreement between how we take something to be and how it really is), should believe. If there's an experience of disagreement (sometimes called a "disappointment") between how something is meant and how it is given, we should revise the way we take something to be, in favor of how the thing is given. In Husserl's view, "the human being has to become what it is:" a rational animal. The ethical human being is the one who seeks to understand the world as it is given; the ethical life is the fully rational life, with beliefs guided by the principle of evidence. What we have in the early writings of Husserl is an ethics of belief that is teleological and evidentialist. Despite that the 'ethical' human will change their mind in the face of evidence, however, Husserl leaves open the possibility of self-deception, either willful or due to value-laden (and thus 'emotional') passive synthesis. For more see, for instance: D. Welton, ed. *The Essential Husserl* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

⁴ See, for instance: Waltraut Stein, ed., *On the Problem of Empathy: The Collected Works of Edith Stein* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1989).

⁵ *Chocolat*. Miramax: 2000.



all of the faithful townspeople during Lent...with chocolate.

But there's something more than the making of chocolate that's transpiring in her little chocolate shop, for the chocolate itself is merely a pathway for people to come, be seen, and have safe space to as they discover that life can look otherwise than it has.

Into the shop come a woman who's been abused and finds safety; in comes a couple who had forgotten to love one another and find passion again; in come people to find life and joy and happiness that they had forgotten because they were so busy being good French Catholics.

And how many times does not faith operate that way for some of us—where faith becomes a list of morality codes: do and don't do this, make sure that you come to church and if you don't, God will send you to hell or something?

But what if instead faith isn't about abstaining from the wrong things, but faith is actually about letting oneself be found by love? Because it seems that that's actually a much more vulnerable thing, is it not? Faith that is rooted in love and opens us up to love instead of a faith rooted in fear which roots us in shame.

Love brings with it a type of vulnerability that opens us up in ways we never thought or expected. And yet, even as a song that was just sung before, some of us have known great pain in our lives, and so it feels a lot easier to close our hands and say, "I'm not going there." For when we live in that space of fear where we say, "I'm not going there," what we are really saying is, "I'm afraid. I'm afraid of what might happen if I opened my hands." And when we live in this space of fear, we have a few options of how we might interact and engage with the world. We either live in that fear where we feel constantly terrorized, we try to avoid our fears and then we're obsessed, OR we learn to live with our fears and in so doing we live courage as we discover that our fear can melt away.

Let me return for a minute to our text. The verb here for love in Greek, it's not a past tense word: love isn't a one and done sort of thing. Love is something that changes and transforms us over time. Love is that which invites and calls us forth over and over again; it's the way we turn towards each other. It's the way that we wake up and actually look ourselves in the mirror and try to give ourselves grace. It's the way that we move into a world that might look a lot less certain, but a world that is so much more rich and filled with the color and life that love gives and provides. THIS is what the perfecting love that drives our fear does in and to and through us.

I wanted to share a poem with you about this, it's called, "The World I Live In", by Mary Oliver.

The World I Live In



I have refused to live
locked in the orderly house of
reasons and proofs.
The world I live in and believe in
is wider than that. And anyway,
what's wrong with *Maybe?*
You wouldn't believe what once or
twice I have seen. I'll just
tell you this:
only if there are angels in your head will you
ever, possibly, see one.⁶

So as we move into this new year, I wonder what it would look like for us to move into the love of God, to be a people who are so transformed by it, who are so marked by it that we live in ways that don't make sense. What if we chose the perfecting love that drives out fear? What if we become more deeply a people who turn the other cheek, love our enemies, are willing to go to the point of death for people who've rejected us? Love invites and calls to us all and love also heals and restores us all.

Love opens us. It births within us new dreams, it enlivens the future and humanizes us to each other and even to ourselves.

Living love then is not about the absence of fear, but it's about the way that we, to quote a book, *Feel the Fear and do it Anyway*.⁷ It's about the call of this Christ and a faith that says to us:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God, whoever does not know love, does not know God, because God is love.”

This is how God showed love among us, God sent the one and only son into the world that we might live through Christ. This is love. Not that we loved God, but that God loved us and sent the son as a sacrifice for our sin. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another for no one has ever seen God. But if we love one another God lives in us and God's love is made complete in us. This is how we know that we live in God and God in us. God has given us God's Spirit and we have seen and testified that the God has sent the son to be the savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know, and we rely upon the love that God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love, lives in God. This is how love is made complete among us, so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment.

⁶ Mary Oliver, “The World I Live In,” from *Felicity* (New York, Penguin: 2015), 11.

⁷ Susan Jeffers, *Feel the Fear and Do it Anyway*, 20th Anniversary ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 2006).



In this world, we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love, but perfect or perfecting love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because God first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a sibling is a liar, for whoever does not love their brother or sister who they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. And God has given us this command. Anyone who loves God must also love their siblings. 483

May our 2016 be filled and transformed by the love of God and may it change our fear into a faith that changes our world. Amen.

ON KEEPING WARM THROUGH THE NIGHT (MN Interfaith Power and Light)

I'm in the midst of a significant life decision, and in my discernment and processing I've been brought face-to-face with the ways in which I was formed to believe that it is my job to carry people and systems—that I must do this so that the things and the world I believe in will come to fruition.

And while there are parts of this internalization that I intend to carry with me long into the future (for I believe we are all, indeed, a part of the earth and one another), there are other parts of this narrative and identity that I seek to breathe life into so that I might release and let go of with compassion and self-love the ways in which I believe that I am responsible for saving (or destroying) the things and people I love.



What I mean by this wrestling is something like this quote:

“You don’t have to set yourself on fire to keep someone else warm.”

For maybe, like me, things in this world have and continue to break your heart. And you carry people and this earth in your skin and in your soul.

And I find that at times in this work I am lured into believing that I can be a sacrifice for the cause of more love and justice in the world.

But then...I am gently held and reminded by a quiet voice that it is through love that the world is changed, not through fire, and certainly not through the sacrifice of myself will the long arc of goodness find life and breath.

No, instead the way to keep one another warm is through the radiance of our own heat and beauty and skin as we hold one another. For both you and I are needed to survive the long night. Through our words, our presence, and our collective warmth, we will keep one another awake; we will keep watch while the other finds needed sleep...and together we will awaken to a new morning.

“You don’t have to set yourself on fire to keep someone else warm.” Exhale. Yes. The other week I spoke with my therapist, through tears, reflecting on community that has shaped and formed me, at a loss to know how to voice the truth my soul knew already: that I wanted and needed to make a choice to care for myself. As I wrestled with my knowing, she spoke to me the worlds of reminder from the poem “Wild Geese” by Mary Oliver: “You do not have to be good/You do not have to walk on your knees/For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.”

“You do not have to be good.”

How many of us were formed to be the “good ones”? The kids who cared for a family in chaos; the ones who awakened to the urgency of our climate...and believed that we carried the weight of the “saving” on our shoulders and our skin (of course most of us would be loath to admit this because we all know the importance and value of solidarity)?

How many of us believed we had to be good?

And how many of us have lived our lives as a perpetual act of repentance, or in some ways this work becomes the place to exorcise the demons that haunt us? What if we are found out? What if we are tried and found lacking? And so we radicalize more and push ourselves to the brink in service of that in which we believe.

I wonder...what if...what if we forgave ourselves?

What if we turned towards love?

Even loving ourselves?

What if we remembered the words of Audre Lorde when she writes...

CARING FOR MYSELF IS
NOT SELF-INDULGENCE, IT
IS SELF-PRESERVATION,
AND THAT IS AN ACT OF
POLITICAL WARFARE.

Audre Lorde

CraftyCrookshanks.typepad.com

What if we do not have to walk “for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting”?

What if instead, we headed this invitation: “You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.”

Love. In my community of faith, we sing a [song](#) that goes like this: “We believe that love can change the world. It’s the only thing that can it’s the only thing that will.”

And what if that love holds even us? What if it starts there? What if: **“You do not have to set yourself on fire to keep others warm”?**

“You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.”

I went home and read and re-read the whole poem “Wild Geese.” I made it my cover photo on FaceBook. I shared it with three friends who were all holding similar questions and were slogging through the mud. And through tears and conversation, we shared in each other’s warmth and reminded each other:

*You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it*



loves.

*Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
 Meanwhile the world goes on. Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain are
 moving across the landscapes,
 over the prairies and the deep trees,
 the mountains and the rivers.
 Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
 are heading home again.
 Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
 the world offers itself to your imagination,
 calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting —
 over and over announcing your place
 in the family of things.
 You are seen. You are loved.*

And may this love that holds us all sustain you like the wild goose that you are. May you love your “soft animal body”. May we be a people who “tell each other of our despair”.

And may the warmth of our bodies and our words keep each other warm through the night.

Take good care, my friends, for you...alive and flying high...you are what is needed to sustain the work of life in our world.

With gratitude and in hope,

Sara WG

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4 Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John”² —although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized—³ he left Judea and started back to Galilee. ⁴ But he had to go through Samaria. ⁵ So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.”⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)¹⁰ Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”¹¹ The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” ¹³ Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”¹⁵ The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” ¹⁷ The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; ¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” ¹⁹ The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” ²¹ Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” ²⁵ The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” ²⁶ Jesus said to her, “I am he*, the one who is speaking to you.”

Footnotes:

*John 4:26 Gk *I am*

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Sermon: “In Spirit and in Truth”

Well, good morning.

Let’s pray: God we give you thanks— for this morning and this place, and that you are a God who shows up in the everydayness of our lives...at the wells and the water coolers; at the fireplaces and around tables. God, be with us and meet us here. It’s in the name of Christ that we pray and give thanks. Amen.

Well, so hi. I’m Sara. If you don’t know that yet, then you weren’t here earlier or you were sleeping. ☺ When I knew I was going to have the opportunity to preach today, I had a few goals: 1) I didn’t want to preach a bad sermon; 2) In view of the work we are doing with ReForming (where we are intentionally trying to listen to where God’s Spirit is inviting us in this next season) I wanted my sermon to be a part of the discernment and listening that we are all doing together; 3) I also wanted you to know a little bit about how I roll (I like to ask questions) and to introduce myself to you; and finally 4) I hoped to be an encouragement to you as we continue on this good journey together. So welcome.

I titled this sermon “In Spirit and In Truth.” I was originally going to preach on something else, but following the conversation last week with the consultant from TAG, I kept on coming back to this passage in John and the notion at the end about “in Spirit and in truth.” And here’s why...

One of the things that stood out to me the most from the consultant’s presentation was when he started out by saying “When we go into these spaces with churches or communities, one of the things we want to affirm is that **the answer is already in this room.**”

The answer is already in this room.

Their job as consultants is not to come in and tell us: “Here’s how you are going to be the church.” “Here’s what it looks like...” “Here’s the cookie cutter solution.” No, their job is to affirm and reflect back to us that which we already know God has been stirring—those places of passion, of joy, of longing...

God is already here. We just get to listen...and then, together, create and see what happens. Said another way, it’s a reminder that **the answer is already in this room.**

That’s why on Wednesday night when Carter was out of town and he asked if I wanted to talk with the Senior Highers, I was like: “Sure! That’s great.” (And then I walked in the room and wondered what I was doing. Why am I here?! FYI- if you are a senior higher the deal is that individually, I think you are great, but you are really hard to read as a group and I’m

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never quite sure how to talk with you all as I haven't hung out with a group of senior highers in a long time). So I took a breath and got all of my resolve together to act like a good adult and got to spend some time with them. Now, I went into that space not with some big lecture or sermon, but instead we, together, read this passage from John. Everyone took a verse and we went around the room. One of the things I said early on as some of the students were stumbling over words (that they never read- because who talks about Samaritans in their daily life?!). So they are reading along and you can hear the embarrassment as some of them don't know how to pronounce things and so I asked them to pause and noted it's OK to not know because we aren't going to judge each other—inviting them, if you don't know the words, no problem just keep reading. I told them we are going to do the same thing that some pastors do, it's called a Text Study. A text study is where a group gets together, they all read the text together and then individually and collectively talk about what came up for them as they read, noting what stood out to them. As a part of doing our own Text Study then, I put the students into groups and asked them to share: 1) Did anything stand out? Did anything strike you as weird? Did anything make you happy? Upset? Angry? What were those things? Please share those with the group. 2) I asked them to also notice if they had any questions about the passage and to share those with the group. So we spent some time in the groups and when we came back together, the students shared. One of my favorite responses: *“Jesus is sassy.”* Here are some others:

“Jesus crosses boundaries.”

“Jesus accepts her.”

“Did you notice how he WAS I AM HE the whole time but it's only at the end that he's all like...IT'S ME!”

“I think about how everyone should be able to have access to water.”

And then they shared some of their questions. Questions like:

“I wonder if the woman felt OK with not having a husband? Was she ashamed or not?”

“What does it mean to worship in Spirit and in Truth?” (Thank you!)

So why did I do this exercise? Well, one of the reasons is because I didn't know them and I wasn't about to walk into a group of senior highers and be like: “Hi, I'm Sara, and I'm the pastor and I have all the answers.” (as if that would actually ever be the case) The second reason I did this is because I am a firm believer that we all have moral agency; we are all persons who carry the image of God in us. As scripture says, there is a priesthood of all believers and all of our voices and gifts matter. This means that you and your story and the things that you know and have experienced—the sorrow and the pain, and in the joy—you teach me, and we teach each other about the goodness of grace and love. And if we are concerned that young people leave church, then wouldn't we want to affirm that the faith is already theirs? That this God loves them precisely in their story-- in the passions that make their hearts burn? In their wondering? This faith is a faith that is ours and I wanted them to

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know that, just as I want that for all of us for, as the consultant reminded us: **The answer is already in this room.**

So let's return to the passage and I'll give you a bit of context that I didn't give to the students. One of the things that seems clear right away is that the Samaritans and the Jews weren't exactly best friends. There are reasons and some history behind this. The conflict was rooted in a struggle about who understood God rightly (because, you know, humans have never struggled with this!). They had a long-term disagreement about where to worship God/where the sacredness of God's presence dwelt. They also diverged in their opinions about what counted as the sacred text. Additionally, there were rumors and infighting related to if there had been intermarriage amongst the Samaritans and the Gentiles, and what this meant for their being the people of God (this stemmed from the Babylonian Captivity). So you have the Samaritans believing that God showed up at Mt. Gerizim whereas the Jews believe that God's presence was at the temple in Jerusalem. And never the twain shall meet. “We have the true access to God!” Yells the one. To which the other responds: “No, we do!”

And yet here, in this moment, at this well, Jesus (who's a Jew) and a Samaritan woman (no less) come together. Jesus talks with the Samaritan woman, in spite of the fact that these groups didn't talk or interact with one another. This engagement between Jesus and the woman was a type of “boundary crossing”—of moving across the room and the divides between humans because of our differences in order to see, hear, and be with one another. In this space between them, power and vulnerability is exchanged as Jesus, who is thirsty and can't get a drink without this woman, is vulnerable before her. And the woman shows her vulnerability in asking if he realizes that she is a Samaritan woman (acknowledging that she know he isn't supposed to be talking with her).

Now the book of John is a study of polemics in many ways—light is contracted with darkness, life with death, etc. John employs these binaries in order to make his point: Jesus is always the true light, the vine, the good shepherd, the water, the bread of life over against the darkness, the thief, and being cut off. And often in the book of John we see that the people we expect, or the stories we think are the “right person” who will “get it” is often *not* the person who apprehends who Christ is. So just to remind you (or to let you know) in John 3 a religious leader named Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the cover of the night (night). And then, in chapter 4 a Samaritan (!) woman comes to Jesus in the day (notice- day is the signal of faith over-against the night). We have a signal from John then in chapters 3-4: with the light we know there is something of light, faith, and goodness going on. Yet, so often when we read chapter 4, we think of, or have been taught to think, that this is a story of a “sinful woman”. But I'd like to inquire: where do we read that she is particularly sinful? Does Jesus say this? Does she ask for forgiveness? This is just the story of a Samaritan woman who comes and meets Jesus at the well and they begin having this conversation. Jesus sees her and it opens up space for them to talk about where God dwells.

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David Lose, both a pastor and former professor at Luther Seminary, notes that how we read this passage says a lot about us. If we think this is the story of a woman who is a victim, who was sinful, it might tell us what *we* bring to texts—where we have presumptions about what we see in a frame. What happens then as we sit with the picture and wonder if there are other ways to see a text? What if we ask some questions about our presumptions about what is going on in the story? What if we wonder and allow God’s Spirit to open up new ways to see?¹

So what if instead we see this as a story as both a “boundary crossing” and a tale of one of the very first disciples and evangelists? The story about a woman who, unlike Nicodemus, actually understood who Jesus was. She notes: “I see you are a prophet.” And so she pushes him and questions him, like a student of a Rabbi would. In fact, she becomes the first recorded evangelist who not only apprehends who Jesus is, but then goes to tell the whole town about her experience and encounter with Jesus.

She is a moral agent, a person who is seen by Christ, and this connection opens her up; she asks for living water. And in the book of John, water is about faith- it symbolizes and indicates the ones who understand what God is about in Christ. There is no word of judgment from Christ here in John 4, there is no comment about the Samaritan woman being sinful, no, instead Jesus engages with her and talks with her like a Rabbi about where God shows up. And she is the first recorded witness.²

¹ See: https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1920. He writes: “For this is a passage and story that has, in my opinion, been notoriously misinterpreted, in part because we read it in isolation of the rest of John’s gospel and in part because of the Church’s history of bad treatment of women. So let me lay my cards on the table: I don’t think the Samaritan woman is a prostitute. I don’t think that she has a shady past. And I don’t think Jesus forgives her. Rather, I think he calls her not to repentance but to life-giving faith. Allow me to explain.”

² Rev. Dr. Karoline Lewis, Professor at Luther Seminary, has some wonderful commentary on this. “She is a woman, she has no name, but she meets Jesus at noon, in full daylight. And the contrast between their conversations with Jesus is even more extraordinary. Whereas Nicodemus is unable to move beyond the confines of his religious system, the Samaritan moves outside of her religious expectations and engages Jesus in theological debate (4:20). Whereas Nicodemus cannot hear that Jesus is sent by God (3:17), the woman at the well hears the actual name of God, “I AM” (4:26--“he” in the NRSV is not in the Greek text). While Nicodemus’s last questioning words to Jesus expose his disbelief, “How can this be?” the last words of the woman at the well, also posed as a question, “He cannot be the Christ, can he?” lead her to witness to her whole town.” ... “Perhaps the extraordinary aspect of this text is not simply that Jesus is *for her*, but that she becomes a witness *for him*.” Also: “The Samaritan woman at the well is not a passive recipient of Jesus’ offer. She immediately recognizes the societal barriers and boundaries that keep her in her place (4:9) but at the same time challenges Jesus’ authority over and against the ancestors of the faith (4:12). Like Nicodemus, she first interprets Jesus’ words on a literal level, but she is able to ask for what Jesus has to offer rather than question the possibility (4:15). She is not certain that Jesus is the Christ (4:29--the syntax of the Greek expects a negative answer), but she does not let that stop her from leaving behind her water jar, going into the city, and inviting the people to their own encounter with Jesus. She demonstrates what can happen when we actually engage in conversation and questions about our faith. The woman at the well shows us that faith is about dialogue, about growth and change. It is not about having all the answers. If we think we have all the

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What then is the invitation to us about maybe even the parts of our own stories, our lives, and our histories that we would rather not be seen; the places we feel are beyond love, beyond grace?

And what if the gospel isn't just about that person out there who is on the margins and needs forgiveness, but it's about living inward and opening ourselves to experience God's love and forgiveness for ourselves?

What if it's about allowing God to do the “boundary-crossing” as Jesus did here, to also love us?

What does this text invite from us and speak to us?

What does it enliven in you as you consider the invitations of God that are already in this room?

What does it mean for us to be people who know ourselves as seen by God and to then be people who turn towards and see others? To be people who cross boundaries, because we have known a God who crosses boundaries to meet us in the very realness of our lives?

The answer is in this room. The answers are already here in this room.

So we come to this part about “in Spirit and in truth”, about whose traditions and temple were the location of the sacred, and Jesus does a few amazing things. First of all, he dismisses the notion that there is a physical location that is the only space where God shows up. It's not Jerusalem, he says, it's not here on this mountain, it's everywhere. Additionally, he invokes a reference in verse 26 to what happened when Moses encountered God in the burning bush and says: “I AM.” Jesus signals that he is this “I AM.” It's a reminder that this presence of God shows up not only in the burning bushes, at the well, but also here in this space—in the midst of our celebrations about the Vikings' wins (hopefully!). This claim of “I AM” by Jesus is in conversation with John 2 where Jesus says that if you destroy the temple he will rebuild it, but he is the temple and the spirit is now not in any location, but is available everywhere. And yet, how many times in our lives do we still believe that some external authority has to tell us the truth about God? As if the pastor has special access to the answers?

answers, if we are content with our doctrinal constructs, if we believe more in our own convictions than the possibility of revelation, we will be left to ponder whether or not God will choose to be made known.”

See: https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=44

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What has God been inviting and already been cultivating in your spirit? Where are the places where God has shown up at the “wells” in your life? And how do we actually believe that this God of love is actually for all of us?

The answer is already in this room.

So what happens when we allow ourselves to be seen? What happens when we believe the “I AM” is FOR US? What unfolds when we recognize that the divine is in our midst- that the God who already is, is with us at the water coolers and in the dailyness of loving our families, of messing up, and being human. This is the God of I AM—the sacred space, is now every space, and the knowledge of God isn’t located in some external holy mountain or temple, but with and in us.

As we talk about ReForming, we talk about how the world has changed and people no longer come to church the way they used to. But we ourselves have changed. How many of you had cell phones 20 years ago? And how many of you have one now? How many of want to check it right now (FYI- if I’m ever preaching and you look at your phone, I’ll just assume you are tweeting a great quote that you wanted to share with your followers!). We have changed too. And do we not believe that this God— who has shown up throughout history—will continue to show up? We don’t have to flail about then in this time of discernment, no, we just have to root in and listen more deeply, allowing ourselves to be seen in **this** time and space. God isn’t on some mountaintop, nor is God located somewhere in some past glory day. God is here. God is in our homes. God is in our schools and in our work. And we are present in that space and in this time, which is why Christ reminds us that faith is all around:

“In spirit and in truth.”

“In spirit and in truth.”

The answer is already in this room.

So may we be people who listen in, people who are willing to open ourselves to the whisperings of the Spirit, people who let each other, those others, and God “trouble” us and open us up to questions and new ways of seeing. And in all of this, may we trust that the I AM who met Moses in a burning bush, the I AM who met a Samaritan woman at a well, the I AM who has shown up throughout history, is the same I AM who loves you, who loves me, and who is doing a new thing amongst all who live in Spirit and in truth.

The answer is already in this room.

So may this grace and love, may freedom and goodness be yours and be ours. And may we be a people who say YES to whatever God’s Spirit might invite us to next as we ReForm. In

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spirit and in truth...for **the answer is already in this room.** May God give us grace to listen and follow in faith. Amen.

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12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. **13** For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. **15** If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. **16** And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. **17** If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? **18** But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. **19** If all were a single member, where would the body be? **20** As it is, there are many members, yet one body. **21** The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” **22** On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, **23** and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; **24** whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, **25** that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. **26** If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

27 Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. **28** And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. **29** Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? **30** Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? **31** But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

Opening Prayer

God- Holy Spirit, on this morning as we gather as one body of many parts, we give you great thanks. God, whether we are eyes, or hands, or feet, we are all part of this body. So in our individuality and in our collective, meet us and invite us more fully into what it means to be this body. By your grace and strength and courage and love and life, we say YES. In your name we pray.

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Amen.

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Sermon: “Faith Embodied”

Well, hi again. If you weren't here last week, just so you know, I'm Sara and I'm now a part of your pastoral staff, so hi. ☺ And for those of you who were here last week, welcome back. It's good to be with you again this Sunday. Thank you, Daniel, for letting me preach twice in a row, which is very fun for me.

So there's a sermon you might expect that I'm going to preach, which some of you have heard before about the body of Christ and about the different roles as apostles, teachers, etc. that we are all called to play. I think that's a noble sermon; I like that sermon. But one thing about me is that I sometimes like to preach *the other sermon*. So today I wanted to bring another perspective and think a little bit about what this passage invites or evokes in terms of who we are as members of this body: Namely, I want to explore what it means if we're all a part of the body of Christ, what does it mean that have bodies? What does it mean that we have human skin—that we ourselves have eyes and ears and livers and hands and feet? What about this diversity that we hold in our own bodies themselves? And what do we do with a faith that follows a God who put on human flesh and came in human skin, embodied as God with us? What does it mean that we live in bodies as a part of the body (of Christ)? That's what I want to talk about today.

Now, some of the reason that I wanted to talk about faith embodied and our bodies is because of some of the lineage in our faith tradition that has been oppositional to bodies (as if bodies were the problem). And I want to suggest today that maybe they might not be something to be overcome in the life of faith. So where does this history and lineage of thinking against the body come from? Well, some of it arises from the New Testament teachings about “the flesh” and “the spirit” and how that in Christ we are called to reject the things of the flesh and instead live out the things of the Spirit. There are passages like Galatians 5:17 that say:

“For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.”

And we have theologians such as early church Father, Saint Jerome, and the early desert fathers would go to the desert to escape the things in the world and of the flesh. They would (some of them) literally beat their bodies so

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that they might then experience the Spirit of Christ.¹ There are other theologians like Augustine, who is one of the church Fathers, and he wrote extensively about the dangers of the flesh (he also didn't particularly like women's bodies). And this lineage has passed down to us. We see similar sentiment in the writing of Abelard, a man who had been in love with a woman he shouldn't have been who wrote about how the flesh tempts us and is of the devil.² There are even prayers, such as in the Book of Common Prayer that we would be spared from all of the things of the flesh and the devil.³

But, and this is a big but, the Apostle's Creed affirms that resurrection happens in our bodies! The resurrection of the flesh meant that the body itself is an essential part of resurrection. And contra other philosophies of the time, Christianity argued that bodies matter for the life of faith. And if we think more about this, let's talk about how we are people who believe that humans are made in the image of God. So what does it mean to be the image bearers of God? Are our bodies a part of that image-bearing? And what do we do with this “Emmanuel” (God-with-us) who took on human form and became like one of us and lived in a body? So what if way to live out spirit and not flesh, isn't about rejecting the fact that we are bodies with fingers and hands and toes and feet, but instead, it's an invitation to live into our true created-ness in the image of God... in our bodies?

Okay, so I hear some of you saying, “Ok, Sara, but isn't this dangerous? Does anything go then? Can I do whatever my body wants?” Well, I hear you and I know that there are some concerns, but I want us to think a little bit more about it. Because here's one of the concerns I have: if we reject our bodies and our bodily existence, then how are we actually supposed to be the body of Christ? Furthermore, if the body is so dangerous, then why are we told in 1 Corinthians that are the liver and skin-- we are the parts that we see and the parts that aren't seen. What do we do with the Psalmist's words in Psalm 139 that we have been perfectly and wonderfully made, formed together in our mothers' wombs? Is there not a beauty of our embodied existence together? And so, if we are indeed made an image of God, then is not the rejection of our bodies tantamount to the rejection of part of the image of God in us? That we're created in the image of this creator God and this matters...

¹ To learn more about this, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mortification_of_the_flesh.

² The phrase definitely appears in the writings of Abelard, who writes that “there are three things that tempt us: the world, the flesh, and the devil.” See: Abelard, Exposition of the Lord's Prayer, sixth petition (“And lead us not in temptation.”).

³ The litany of the 1662 edition of *The Book of Common Prayer* contains the petition: “From fornication, and all other deadly sin; and from all the deceits of the world, the flesh, and the devil, Spare us, good Lord.” See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Common_Prayer.

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And if God is love, what happens when we hate our bodies? How is self-hatred or hatred of our bodies a pathway to life and into the goodness of the gospel...for God is love and God has made us in bodies. So what if instead of our bodies being the problem, what if Christ being embodied as God-with-us is an invitation to throw off the things that kill and destroy—that the flesh, instead of it being our skin—“the flesh” is any moments where we destroy or ignore or harm each others’ bodies and the image of God in one another and in ourselves? What if Christ being made human then is an invitation back to the garden where humans got to walk with God? They walked in their bodies with God! What if part of the invitation is to us, in the beautiful profound diversity of how God is formed us--to be free? As John reminds us: the thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy...but God has come in Christ to give us LIFE. So “spirit” (over against the flesh) is where we choose life, where we affirm the goodness of God’s image in one another and in ourselves, and together live out the promise of the gospel: of freedom for all of us, in our bodies, and in our skin.

Now I know that at times there can be a fear that if we focus on our bodies, or if I focus too much on myself, I’ll become a narcissist. And okay, to be fair, I’ll honor this concern, but I have a few thoughts about it. The first is this: when I know I’m actually loved, when I live from that place where I know I’m seen and created by this creator God, when I live from this space, and center of myself, I’m like the tree in Psalm 1 that’s deeply rooted and love overflows because love is at my center. So I think about my relationship with Andy, when I rooted in who I am and that I am loved by God, I can turn towards him and live love that overflows towards him. But when I am instead feeling insecure and like there’s something missing in me, that’s when I lash out or shut down or foreclose the pathways of love in my life with him. Said another way, if we think about humility as a virtue, and part of the invitation of the spiritual life, then humility is not found in thinking more highly *or* more lowly of ones’ self than we ought, but humility is about seeing ourselves rightly, and part of seeing ourselves rightly is to affirm that we are made in the image of God, called to be people of life and of good news and of promise **in our bodies**.

Let me give an example of this: some of you know about StrengthsFinder. It’s a personality assessment to help look at that themes that impact how you move in the world... it’s kind of like 1 Corinthians 12: some of us are prophets, some of us are teachers. So one of my themes is WOO (it stands for Winning Others Over). Here’s the deal: I’ve seen WOO function as a strength and as a beautiful thing in community AND I’ve seen what happens when my WOO is fed by the parts of myself that I believe are unlovable, namely this- if I don’t believe that I’m loved, then I’ll do anything to get you to love me just because I

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need that. That’s not really that affirming of the body of Christ because I’m using you!

But when I am rooted as knowing myself as made in the image of God and beloved by God, and I know who I am in Christ, then my desire to connect with you is about affirming that we are all part of this community and there’s an invitation for all of us. That’s humility: thinking rightly of ourselves. That’s the invitation of the Spirit.

Said another way, Martha Nussbaum, who is a political philosopher and ethicist, talks about the necessity of love for justice and how love animates compassion. She talks about compassion as a painful emotion that we experience when we see and witness suffering. She talks about how we can’t live with compassion if we are blocked because we’ve refused our vulnerability or knowledge that we dependent. And when we refuse this vulnerability and dependency that we have on God and one another, we live in shame and disgust, and we then refuse the other because I put off on you the things that I have rejected in myself. But when we do that inner work and healing, there’s more spaciousness for us to love and turn towards one another. In this way, said as a Christ-follower, it’s the ways that grace opens us up so that we can turn towards one another and celebrate the goodness of the diversity of this body of Christ, and **together** give witness to the good news of Jesus. We can then exclaim with our lives and words and bodies:

“God is love!”

“We are loved!”

“There is freedom- find it and live it!”

And as we know this love and freedom for ourselves, we can be people of the good news, people who are rooted and grounded in love of God in Christ.⁴

One of the pathways that I have found more of this life and the ability to say YES to the image of God in myself has been to the work of Brené Brown. Brené Brown is a researcher at the University of Houston and she studies shame and the ways that shame prevents us from being able to live wholeheartedly. So if we people believe who believe as John 10:10 says, that Christ came to give us life and that the thief comes to steal and destroy, then we are called to be people who live wholeheartedly—we are called to be people of life and freedom and good news. But when we are living in shame or fear or hatred, this prevents us from being able to access the fullness of the

⁴ See; Martha Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (Boston: Harvard Press, 2013).

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love of God in Christ. And as we invite God’s love into our hearts and spirits and skin to celebrate the goodness of God’s Spirit that is within us and has formed us, then we become people who are able to embrace this freedom more wholeheartedly.⁵

Now here’s why I think this work of loving who we are and our bodies matters: First of all, I think that being a Christian is an invitation to life. We have a God who loved us so much that God’s gave the Christ to walk amongst us, to call and invite us home to freedom, and that freedom is for our lives even in the here and now. We pray this, do we not: “May your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.” We pray, work, and diligently seek that the Spirit of God makes us free too. And I think that this freedom is important not only for our own lives, but also for our collective lives, and for the ways that we are church in the world.

We live in a time when there is the rise (as Pew talks about) of the NONES (people who are religiously unaffiliated), and in part they are *because* of us--because of the ways in which the church throughout history has forgotten its first and primary call to be the body of Christ, the promise of good news and the love of God in the world. So as we all individually live in our skin and be the beautiful diversity of the body of Christ, and become people who know love and freedom, we then live that out in the world and we aren’t moved by judgment or power politics or the things of “the flesh”—the desire for money, or to kill, or to destroy one another—no, instead, we are people who witness and bear testimony in our skin to the promise of God’s love... **in our skin.**⁶

Our bodies are imperfect, they are frail. We are all dying...but we are all also living. And in our skin we bear witness to God’s love and God’s image.

So you might be a liver.

You might be a knee cap.

You might be a finger or a toe.

You might be that foot that just taps to the music.

Whatever and whoever you are, may we all, in our bodies, invite the love of God to heal and to restore, to see, to transform, to set us free--to be bodies that are part of this body of Christ.

⁵ Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Letting Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 2010).

⁶ Michael Lipka and Clair Gecewicz, “More Americans now say they’re spiritual but not religious.” Pew Research (SEPTEMBER 6, 2017). Accessed online: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/>.

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You are embodied, and in your body you give witness to the Spirit of God. So may this love of God heal and restore all of us.

Come home to your body and then, together, let’s be the body of God.

Closing Prayer Practice

As we close, I’m going to invite you to rise as you are able and I will have us end with a prayer—in our bodies.

(First I invite you to place your hands over your heart): Breathe in the love of God in Christ. May God’s Spirit hold your heart. May God’s Spirit transform us to know love. May we be a people of love and freedom.

(Now holding out your hands): We hold out our hands to receive with joy the goodness of the love of God in our bodies. May these hands which cook and clean and mend be hands that heal, hands that restore, hands that create.

(Now to our minds and heads): May our minds be filled with the goodness of the love of God. May we think and reason together. May we seek and pursue this goodness of God. We give you thanks for this.

(And to our lips): May laughter and kindness, may the celebration of ourselves as persons who speak words of life, be ours.

(And one last one—hug yourself with your arms): You are loved by God. In this body. Breathe in God’s Spirit. Celebrate and dance. Pray and serve...in your body. And may you be the body of God and the witness to Christ together.

In all things, oh good God, we give you thanks.

Amen.



People on Pilgrimage

Psalm 30 (NRSV)

Thanksgiving for Recovery from Grave Illness
A Song at the dedication of the temple. Of David.

- 1 I will extol you, O Lord, for you have drawn me up,
and did not let my foes rejoice over me.
- 2 O Lord my God, I cried to you for help,
and you have healed me.
- 3 O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol,
restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.
- 4 Sing praises to the Lord, O you faithful ones,
and give thanks to God's holy name.
- 5 For God's anger is but for a moment;
God's favor is for a lifetime.
Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.
- 6 As for me, I said in my prosperity,
"I shall never be moved."
- 7 By your favor, O Lord,
you had established me as a strong mountain;
you hid your face;
I was dismayed.
- 8 To you, O Lord, I cried,
and to the Lord I made supplication:
- 9 "What profit is there in my death,
if I go down to the Pit?
Will the dust praise you?
Will it tell of your faithfulness?"
- 10 Hear, O Lord, and be gracious to me!
O Lord, be my helper!"
- 11 You have turned my mourning into dancing;



you have taken off my sackcloth
and clothed me with joy,

12 so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.

O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

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Will you pray with me? Holy Spirit, breathe on and in us. Breathe your words of life. Breathe your words of love. We give you thanks. Amen.

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Well, good morning! It's good to see you all this morning. I'm glad to be with you.

We're right in the middle of three of four weeks of preaching Psalm 30, so if you missed the first two, well, you came just in time! And if you've been here every week, then you get to hear Psalm 30 again. Part of what I think is wonderful about this is it's an opportunity to just demonstrate the ways in which all of us, your ministers, get to approach the same text and encounter it, speak of it in our own voices, in view of our own experiences of God in our lives, and responding to ways in which God invites each of us. I hope even as you listen to each of us that you likewise will hear and listen to God's invitations in and to and through you.

So today it's my turn to preach on Psalm 30 (in case that wasn't yet obvious). I wanted to begin by telling you a story, a story about how my life intersected with the life of this community in the fall of 2004. I was a new seminary student at Bethel. In part, I was at Bethel Seminary to decide if God got to live or if I did...what I mean by that is that the summer before I turned 18, I went on a mission trip to Honduras. On that trip, something broke open in me in a really painful way.

I was in the city center of Tegucigalpa during the America's Cup and a group of young women from our trip (all young, white, and from the USA) had been surrounded by a bunch of men from the community. I knew enough Spanish to know what was being said. I was terrified and devastated. Somehow, in the course of a conversation as we processed what happened, a friend of mine said, "Well, Sara, you know it says in the Bible, 'Wives, submit to your husbands.'" I said, "Well, forget that." She's like, "Well, it's in the Bible..."

Now, how we got from talking about misogyny and violence against women to talking about submission of women to men, I'm not quite sure, but for me, the context of that is I'm from a family with a history of domestic violence. My whole life, I had told everyone that Jesus loved everybody, and suddenly I was faced with this big open space asking, "God, do You actually think that half of the population is just subject to the whims of their partner? Because that doesn't feel like love."

Now, for me as a young person who had spent her entire life believing in John 3:16 and telling everyone about it, I didn't know how to reconcile this. I almost couldn't breathe,



like one of those spaces where I'll just not look at it and it'll go away, right? But the question was with me. I went off to college, determined to be a really good Christian now. I was kind of a caricature of myself. "Jesus loves everybody. Jesus loves everybody," but I couldn't breathe because I didn't know if Jesus loved me any longer.

Have you ever had one of those moments where you'd been going along in your life believing in the Gospel of Good News that suddenly felt bitter and like an open gaping wound? For me, it was, again, the space that I could hardly breathe. When I went to seminary to figure out if God got live or if I did, it was because I needed to come face to face with this God again, kind of like Jacob wrestling with God. I was determined to do that and to find out if this God of love that I had believed in my whole life was real and what this God asked of me.

It was in this space and my first spiritual formation class that I came across this book. How many of you have read the text *The Critical Journey*? I have. This book was actually written by two people who have deep connections here at Colonial. One of them was a former pastor here. That's Bob Guelich, and the other author is with us this morning in our choir, Janet Hagberg. When I read that book, I felt suddenly like the Holy Spirit just held me, and for the first time in about five years, I thought maybe I wasn't the problem. Here's what I mean by that.¹

In this book, Janet and Bob outline how our journey of faith is a journey where we traverse different stages of growth, just like we do in our own development as we grow up from being kids. Initially, for many of us, as we come to faith, there's this awe and relief at knowing that we are loved, that we are accepted, and it's a great gift. We begin to grow and to experience the life of discipleship, the forgiveness of God, and we begin to become empowered in our faith. We serve. We're part of these small groups. There's serving opportunities, mission trips.

We continue in this beginning inward journey where we start to unearth and open up parts of our lives. We go deeper. Now, the thing with going deeper is that, of course, it brings up all the stuff, the beauty and the pain. Then as they discuss, many of us often hit what is known as a wall. I hit mine at 17. It was a space where suddenly I felt like God's face was absent, this God that I had known and loved before. Maybe it was a God who wasn't for me. In reading this book for the first time I could breathe because I thought, "You mean, I might be normal? This happens to other people?" Am I the only one here who's ever had any questions? Yes. That means no. Thank you for that. That would've been a really awkward sermon. It would have been okay.

But for me, this was such a gift, this infusion of breath and of oxygen hearing God say to me, "Sara, I've been with you this whole time. Oh, Sara, I love you." To see that not... It didn't even end there, that I could continue to grow in my faith, that it could deepen even further, that I could go into this space where God, instead of being something that kept me from the pain, God became the source of strength and support to do the inner

¹ Janet Hagberg and Robert A. Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith* (Salem, WI: Sheffield Publishing, 1995).



work around my deepest pains because God's love could hold me.

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For me, you all have been a part of my story long before I was actually here. I call the sermon today "People of Pilgrimage" because, indeed, I believe that we are all people who are on journey. Sometimes, the stories we tell ourselves about what that journey needs to look like means everything has to look great. "How are you?" "I'm great. I'm wonderful," except for my kids. I really would like to get rid of them. I don't have any, so if you don't see me with kids, it's not because I rid of them.

There are these things that we carry, these places of pain. Often, in the church, we do a good job with the early stages where we say, "Praise the Lord. Everything's amazing," and it's true for us until it isn't, until the questions surface, and we wonder. Here's one of the things I loved about this book, and it's accounting. While these first stages are true for us when they are, if we hit that place of question of the seeming absence of God and we don't deal with it, it still haunts us. That, which was true before, we try to get back to it. "Oh, if only I could just get back to the way it was when I first started." That's no longer real in the same way.

The invitation of being people of pilgrimage is to keep going deeper, to keep opening up and discovering God's love and Spirit can hold us, even in the places in ourselves, we believe are completely unlovable outside of grace, outside of redemption. Isn't that not part of the promise of Lent that we long for? Resurrection.

We come here now to Psalm 30, a psalm, which is often read and utilized during Lent as we are. It's a psalm with some famous lines in it about weeping lest lingering for the night, but joy coming with the morning. Although the psalm is ascribed to David, it also says that it took place at the Dedication of the Temple. Well, the temple didn't get built until after David, so it's probably a psalm for David or a psalm maybe that was of David that was then utilized when the temple was built.

It's a complex psalm. It's one with praise, but rooted also in places of pain, and both Jeff and Carter have spoken of this already. We begin then in verses one through five. There's a stated intention here to talk about and praise and thank God. This opening alludes to the ways in which God has drawn me up, God has healed me, has brought me up, has restored me. Now, here in verse three, you see it talks about Sheol and the pit in Hebrew thinking Sheol was a quiet dark subterranean world inhabited by the deceased.

It's not the same as our modern notions of hell replete with fire and demons and the devil and a pitchfork that's red because it's hot. That view of hell is a newer theological idea, but it's definitely this place where we are separated from God, unable to praise God because there is silence there.

We continue in this beginning in verse four. In verse four, the speaker addresses the congregation, the faithful ones, and invites them to join the call to Thanksgiving. Now, here, this moment is about all of the days of our lives, the way that God's faithfulness isn't just for a time, but goes over the length of both our lives and the lives of our communities. Now, here in this psalm, we see that David is wrestling asking questions



about God's anger and God's favor and where does God show up in these spaces. As the psalm continues and then moves into verses eight and beyond, we see this continued wrestling that occurs, some of which was spoken about by Carter and also by Jeff. It's in this space where I had known myself believing that God was with me when all was going well. David begins to ask questions about, "Now that I'm in the pit, God, are you here with me?" Part of what I want to talk about with this psalm is this notion that God is with him when all is well ignores the power and the beauty of God's presence in the darkness, that God is with us both in the mountain tops and God is with us as we go to the places that are painful in our lives, and indeed, this is part of the journey.

I had the opportunity to meet with Janet when I had first come to Colonial, so it's been two months for those of you who don't know. It's not that long. We met, and we were talking about Lent and some of the art that she does. Now, one of those pieces is here right in front of us. This is the one we were talking about. As we were speaking, came to this moment of thinking, "We need to use this piece in the message today."

Let me tell you a little bit about it. You actually have, in your bulletin, you have a little bit of a writeup about it. This is the pilgrim coat. Now, Janet this piece after learning about a Japanese tradition where people on pilgrimage, meaning people who take a spiritual journey, would go to these different locations, and they would basically would get these stamps of the places where they had been. She wondered, "If I were to depict my own pilgrim coat with the stamps and the turning points of my journey, what would those be? What would they look like?" Here on the coat you see in the middle, it says, "Oh, love. That will not let me go," and it includes around the edges moments in her life and pilgrimage, the turning points where God had met her and showed up.

We too are people on pilgrimage. We're people on journey. I wonder what happens when we don't just make a coat that has the really beautiful moments, but yes, I was a mountain top, and it was great, but the moments like I began with where we hold our breath, where we feel the pain, and what happens to our faith when we believe that God was present with us in those spaces as well? I'm of the belief that as we open up those parts of our lives and invite God in, that becomes the place for the praise and the Thanksgiving that we see at the end of this psalm.

There's a concept I've done some work with called spiritual bypassing. Spiritual bypassing is this notion where sometimes we can use our faith to not have to deal with the challenging parts of our lives.² Robert Masters writes of it:

Aspects of spiritual bypassing include exaggerated detachment, emotional numbing, and repression, overemphasis on the positive, anger-phobic, blind or overly tolerant, compassion, weak or too porous boundaries, lopsided development, debilitating judgment about one's negativity or shadow elements, devaluation of the personal relative to the spiritual, and delusions of having arrived at a higher level of being.³

² The term "Spiritual Bypassing" was introduced in the early 1980s by John Welwood.

³ See: <http://www.robtaugustusmasters.com/spiritual-bypassing/>



Spiritual bypassing is basically like this: If I take a Jesus pill, I don't have to deal with the hard stuff. I wonder instead what it means if we be a people who believe that Jesus invites us to a feast, not just a fix-it, not just a cotton candy, not something that's just light and fluffy, but something with complex layers of flavor profile, we might say, that's for Daniel, who's a better cook than I am.

As we do this inner life and journey and as we are in pilgrimage, it's my prayer that we can see both the parts of beauty, the success, the wonder as part of when God has been with us, but also the places where God has felt absent, the places where we have questions or are holding our breath. Might we be a people who then let the love of Christ infuse those spaces, maybe to let God hold us, actually.

For me, this came in the form of a question. How would I live if I actually believed God loved me? How would I live if I actually believed God loved me? I knew this intellectually. I was the person who would quote 1 John and say, "Perfect love, perfect love, drive out my fear," and now my work is about breathing in ever more deeply, "Perfect love of Christ, fill me. Perfect love, find me. Perfect love, see me."

This is a journey. It is a pilgrimage. Like those who have gone in spiritual quests and journey throughout time and centuries, we too are on journey. Some days, those journeys will feel like profound vistas, and some days, it will be like a 15-mile slog through the mud where we're barely crawling, but it is my hope and prayer that God would give us the grace and the courage to not turn away from the hard places, but to wonder and open ourselves to this transformative love of Christ, to be people on pilgrimage with the God of love whose love has always been ours.

Today, in the second service, we're going to have an opportunity for you to begin wondering about your own coat, your pilgrim coat, and what would be the places on your coat of the stamps from the moments where God has shown up in powerful ways in your life. Some of those will be these amazing moments of mountain top experiences. Some will be the places where God held you in the midst of the most profound despair and everything in between, but we invite you to join us to make your first stamp, your first passport book on your own coat.

May we be people on pilgrimage. May we be a people who journey with each other as we're on pilgrimage, and may we be a people of faith who both the highs and the lows, the in-between spaces say yes to the feast of love to which Christ is inviting us. As we conclude this time in our worship together, I want to invite Tracy Mooty to come up and share a prayer. You have it on a bookmark in your bulletin, along with the image that's before you today from Janet Hagberg. As she comes up, let us pray a prayer of pilgrimage together.

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Tracy Mooty:

Fellow pilgrims, receive this Pilgrim's Blessing:



May our gracious God give you eyes to see
the course of your life as sacred;
to know in the depths of your being
that the many sunlit paths
and even the shadowy detours have
mattered greatly as they served to
form the very essence of who you are.

May you take heart as you invite
each journey marker
to take shape in your memory;
each learning, wounding, softening,
healing, breaking, strengthening~
claim them as precious and holy,
as the very fabric of your pilgrim coat.

May this coat, your coat,
woven together by the threads of
your God graced, love-filled story
stir you to thank and praise the One who
through it all
warms, protects, sustains and
leads you home.

AMEN.

-by Tracy Mooty



The Foolishness of the Cross

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.'

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.

For Jews demanded signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. And God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

So consider your own call brothers and sisters. Not many of you were wise by human standards. Not many of you are powerful. Not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is lowly and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing the things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that as it is written, 'Let the ones who boast, boast in the Lord.'"

- 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

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Will you pray with me? God, on this Thursday eve, we remember with the church around the world and throughout time, a gathering in which you knelt and washed your disciple's feet. Foolishness indeed of a God in human form, of a God who leads by lovingly washing. God of this new command, be with us this night. In your loving name we pray. Amen.

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Sara: In 2017, a man whose voice sounds like butter won a Grammy for Best Jazz Vocalist, a man by the name of Gregory Porter. Anyone know his music? I know



Andy Garbers does. The rest of you, well, you can listen if you want later. He has a beautiful song called “Take Me to the Alley” and it starts off: “They guild their houses in preparation for the King.” And then he, in my not so great rendition of him, sings something like this,

But they will be surprised when they hear him say, take me to the alley, take me to the afflicted ones. Take me to the lonely ones who cannot find the way. Take me to the alley.¹

The King who comes not for the gilded houses, but for the afflicted. What foolishness indeed. Take me to that alley, God.

Last Sunday, for Palm Sunday, we were reminded of the God who came in, not on a war horse, but of the God who came on a donkey (no, not the donkey named Peaches who was here with us on Sunday), but of a God who came in peace, a God who we call the Prince of Peace.

For those of you who weren't here, or for those of you, who'd like a reminder. The time in which Jesus came to earth was a time in which the Jews were under the rule of the Roman Empire, longing for a hope and redemption. Longing in the ways they had back when they were enslaved in Egypt. Once again they cried out to their God: “Save us! We're expecting a Messiah to throw off this empire, which has ruled us, which kills and destroy us!” ...and in comes the King of the Jews... on a donkey.

Now of course, many thought Jesus would overthrow Rome. And on Palm Sunday we are reminded that they thought he would come and bring peace through war...but that didn't happen, and so tonight on Maundy Thursday we are gathered to remember that this is the night when Jesus is betrayed. He's beaten. He's handed over to the authorities to be put on a cross, an instrument of shame and of torture.

All this is to remind the Jews, “We have the power. We have the power over you. What foolishness is this God? You thought you were going to win. And now look what happened! Your messiah ended up on a cross!”

Could you imagine the pain and sorrow and grief so many must have felt?

This is why, when I think about the cross, I'm reminded of a powerful text by a black theologian here in America, named James Cone. It's called *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.² In the book Cone makes connections between the cross and what it meant in Rome, and what the lynching tree meant in a particularly dark period in our own history of this country after the civil war as blacks were lynched and ruled by Jim Crow laws and segregation. Yet the distance between these two symbols of cross and lynching tree isn't so far, Cone argues. Both are an instrument to say, remember, we have the power. We can steal your life. We can destroy it. And even

¹ Gregory Porter, “Take Me To the Alley,” from *Take Me To the Alley* (Los Angeles: Blue Note Records, 2016).

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



though God was crucified, it's in this way that God demonstrates back to the powers of this world, "You thought you won. You thought that you could silence and kill. You thought the war horse would win. But indeed, it's the donkey that's winning. Indeed I have so loved you that I am in solidarity with you even to death on a cross."

But what foolishness is this? A cross. A lynching tree. Could salvation come to us from these places? And yet this has been part of our story. It's a story of a God who took on human form, who came and walked amongst us, who overcame the world...not through power or strength, but by Spirit.

The Easter story is of a God who said a profound, "Yes!" in the face of the instruments of death that were meant to say, "No."

A God who is in foolishness ended up becoming the savior of the entire world.

A message that though sought to be destroyed is the one that tonight— 2,000 years later— that we celebrate as a remembrance that God is *for us*.

This is foolish. It is foolish indeed. A foolishness that reminds that this is a God who comes on donkeys, as Prince of peace, with one commandment: to love.

Love. This is foolishness indeed.

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Jeff: Earlier this week, I was in St. Paul and I found myself in a little coffee shop preparing for Thursday morning's Bible study, Dudes and Donuts. I found out at coffee shops, they don't serve endless amounts of diet Coke. I was very disappointed. I sat in the booth with some generic soda. I had my computer open and I had my Bible open. And I was thinking through where I wanted to go this week in terms of helping the men that come prepare for this week. I was engrossed in what I was doing, so I wasn't paying attention to the things that are happening around me and all of a sudden I realized there was a young woman standing right next to my booth. I looked up at her and she said, "Is that a Bible?"

I said, "Yes". She said, "Are you reading it?" I said, "I am". She says, "So do you believe what the Bible says?", "I try to". She said, "Well, are you a Christian?" I said, "I am a follower of Jesus". Pause, pause then a slap on the arm and she says, "Good for you". And she walked out. I'll never forget that look on her face. It'll be forever be ingrained in my mind because it was somewhere between that man has a pet dinosaur and I guess if that Bible stuff helps him, that's okay.

I had the sense that she thought my Bible reading was foolish, certainly foolish in today's world. Most believe that the gospel is foolish for the world today. For it stands in direct opposition to what the world offers as beliefs and traditions. Very different then the Christian's beliefs and traditions and the call to love. But let's be honest friends, it's even foolish for us at times, right?



Come on. Old Testament stories, miracles, Jesus' death on a cross and then back to life. Communion, eating the body and the blood of Jesus. Heaven's unconditional love. God's promise to never leave us or forsake us. Really? Some of it sounds even foolish for the church doesn't it. I grew up in the church. My family was a church going family from the very beginning. And I tried really hard to believe it all. Which went okay until we moved to Minneapolis when I was going into my fifth grade year.

I was an easy target. I was bullied by both boys and girls, beat up, torn clothes, books thrown in the garbage. Held down long enough for the bus to leave, which meant I was going to be walking home, probably crying all the way. The worst part, my parents didn't believe it was happening. I hated my life. I wondered why God didn't help me. Why wouldn't God answer my prayers? Why didn't he smite them was my hope. I was foolish to trust God.

But I've learned that God can be trusted. I've learned that God can redeem all things. I'm living testimony to this truth. Just like God took the cross used for shameful execution and made it the symbol of eternal hope, God took my life experiences and used them to create in me a pastor's heart and the champion of the underdog. Now, trust me, I wouldn't want to go through any of those experiences again, but I'm truly grateful for them now. That God would take my life and transform it for his good, foolishness.

Though, the earliest Christians were persecuted and the Jews had indeed longed for redemption from the empire of Rome. It wasn't that long later that the Roman empire took on Christianity as its official religion. And in some ways we began to believe what humans have always struggled with knowing. That it's not by power or by might, but it's always been by spirit. Of a God who walked with us in the garden is the God who walked amongst us. This is foolishness.

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Sara: The first time I ever preached this passage from I Corinthians was when I was working as the Director of Admissions at Luther Seminary. I began by talking about one of my favorite songs (I won't sing again, I promise!). It's a song by the artist P!nk. It's called "Raise Your Glass." It says, "Raise your glass. If you are wrong in all the right ways, all my underdogs, because we will never be, never be anything, but loud and little bitty, dirty little freaks."³

While not an exact literal translation of I Corinthians, I tell you what...I've experienced that passage mornings at spin class at the YWCA in 2012, when we ended every class with the song "Raise Your Glass," as I would look around the room and think: "THIS is what the gospel looks like...a bunch of foolish people who got out of bed at 5:15am, now raising their water bottles in celebration of life.

This is the foolishness of the gospel, that punk kids who get bullied, that young people like me who believed that the way to control my environment was through

³ P!nk, "Raise Your Glass," from *Greatest Hits...So Far* (Malibu, CA: Woodshed Recording, 2010).



perfectionism...that we're all seen and we are loved by the God of all of creation. Some of you have heard me say that I didn't really believe that this love was for me. And yet over time, I've begun to believe it more.

A book I read a number of years ago was called *The Gifts of Imperfection*.⁴ I was quite sure the book had been written for me as it turns out, it wasn't. And yet the gift of it reminded me of the foolishness, right? I'm not loved because I'm perfect. I'm not loved because I can put on a good show. I'm loved because I am. And so are you.

In my work as an ethicist, I talk about love as that which sees us. Love is that which sees us. And God is a God of love. A God who loves us. Think about Daniel's sermon from last week as he reminded us that this God of love at this cross is *with us*.

This is foolishness: that I'm loved. Not because of good works or righteous deeds. Not because I'm brilliant. I just am. And so are you, this is foolishness of the cross, so that when we boast, we boast not because of our strength, but we boast out of this foolishness. You're just loved. This is foolishness, but it sure is good news. This is the good news of the cross: we are all loved.

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Jeff: Henry Ward Beecher, the famous New England minister entered his pulpit one Sunday morning. Awaiting him wasn't unmarked envelope. Opening it, he found a single sheet of paper on, which was written a single word, fool. After chuckling to himself, he held the paper up to the congregation and said, "I have known many, an instance of a person writing letters and forgetting to sign their name. But this is the only instance I've ever known of someone signing their name and forgetting to write the letter".

They thought he was a fool. The world thinks we are fools, but it appears to me in our Scripture tonight and throughout the Bible, that it's a call to the followers of Jesus to embrace this foolishness. The way of the cross, the way of Jesus is to the outside looking in, foolishness. Yet, the world is still watching. They're still watching us. While I was your Mission's Pastor years ago, I had the opportunity to go to India and to be a part of one of the crusades of our ministry partners. I was going to have the opportunity to speak to a hundred thousand Indians. Ten days long speaking, several times a day. I was exhausted by the time the trip was over. As I got ready to board my flight in Delhi, it got delayed a little bit. So I thought I would just close my eyes for a few minutes. Because I'd already checked in. I had my boarding pass. I had my seat. It was the perfect seat, short of first class. Right by the galley, exit row on the aisle.

I woke up, wondering what time it was. Realized I had but moments to get on the plane. And then of course I was the last person on the plane. As I went down the

⁴ Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Letting Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 2010).



aisle, I was okay because I had my seat. I was all set. And as I got closer to my seat, I realized there's a little gathering going on in front of it. And as I got closer, I could hear it was a little bit of a heated conversation between two others who had boarding passes, claiming that seat.

As I arrived, the flight attendant tended who already looked fairly harried looked at me like, "What do you want?" I just turned my boarding pass so she could see it was the same seat. And she just kind of looked at me. I don't know where these words came from, but I said, "What could I do that would help you right now?" She turned and pointed to the back of the plane, that last row where there's five seats, the middle seat was open. I headed back there and pulled into my seat, saying to myself, "What in the world did you open up your mouth?" As we were flying, the flight attendant came back and checked on me. I got a full can of Coke that night, several bags of peanuts, and even got first class food. Didn't change the seat at all.

After a very long flight, after not sleeping at all, I got up to change planes. And as I was walking down the aisle, the flight attendant was standing at that same exit door where my seat would have been. As I came close, she looked me in the eye and she said, "Can I ask you a question?" As I stepped aside for the rest of the folks to disembark, she asked me, "You're a Christian, aren't you?" I said, "Well, why would you ask me that?" He said, "Only a follower of Jesus would have done what you did".

I said, "Well, are you a follower of Jesus too?" She says, "Well, I'm not much of a church goer." I said, "Well, you don't have to be, but I'll bet you there's a lot of good churches out there that would love to have you." She smiled. I smiled. And I left. The world response to foolish people. Those who are trying to understand what they believe and live it out the best that they can, the world wants those examples, needs those examples.

Too often, the world looks at people of faith as foolish. We get up early on Sunday morning when we could be sleeping in after a busy week. Of course, Christians don't have any fun, because the God of the Bible is such a kill joy. Then there is the call to help those in need when we have plenty of need ourselves. And spending time reading the Bible and praying, well, we could be watching TV.

Believing the foolishness of the Bible is risking looking like a fool, but God has used its foolishness to point us to himself in Jesus. Remember what we just read from the apostle Paul, "Consider your own call. Brothers and sisters. Not many of you were wise by human standards. Not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth, but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world. Things that are not, to reduce to nothing, things that are. So that no one might boast in the presence of God". He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus who became for us wisdom from God and righteousness and sanctification and redemption in order that as it is written, let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.

Maundy Thursday is all about God's new ⁶commandment to love and to serve as he



has shown us in Jesus' life. Foolish, I know. A child wrote once, "Dear God, the bad people laughed at Noah saying, 'You made an Ark on dry land, you fool'. But Noah was smart. He stuck with you. And that's what I will do. Your friend, Naan". What a sweet prayer, a prayer that God will use the foolishness of the gospel to give us life.

Maybe Naan's prayer is your prayer tonight. Maybe it's your prayer for the very first time, or it's a prayer that you've prayed before. Let this service of communion that we will celebrate in a moment, be an opportunity for you to recommit to the journey of faith or to commit for the first time to the journey of faith. The foolishness of God's transforming power of the gospel for you and for me. Let us pray.

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Jeff: God we are grateful that you have taken what is foolish to the world and transformed it, and that you continue to transform it through the work of Jesus on the cross. The cross that was meant for misery now becomes hope for us all. Thank you that you hear our prayers. Thank you that you work through the prayers of your people. Thank you that you speak to us in brothers and sisters on the journey and through your word and through the revelation around us. May you keep calling foolish people to follow you. We pray this in your name. Amen.

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Sara Wilhelm Garbers



April 3, 2018 August 18, 2020

On Taking Back Our Power



FIRELIGHT

Wisdom to Support & Inspire

*The original version of this post appeared on Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light. You can access the text on **their website** (https://mnipl.org/uploads/2018/04/Firelight_-On-Taking-Back-Our-Power.pdf) or learn more about their work (<https://mnipl.org>).*

I recently had the opportunity to preach at a local community of faith and I chose to talk about when Jesus met the woman at the well. Jesus was a Jew. The woman was a Samaritan. These were two groups with historic ethnic divides and conflict. Each believed they worshiped God; each had a specific mountain/temple where they believed God resided.

This kind of notion—that the divine resides in a particular place— isn't particular to Jews in the time of Jesus, nor was it to Samaritans. The idea that the divine resides in a particular place, and is external to us, is a very human notion. Kingdoms have long been centered with the ruler at its middle, and society orbited them.

The outworking of the concepts that there is an external sovereign who we must give away our power to in order to live and survive has permeated our political philosophy (e.g. Hobbes' Leviathan) and many theologies (e.g. much of Christian theology, which is my tradition).

And though our society looks different now than many feudal and other societies of old, often we have been tutored to believe that there must be an external source, a divine sovereign of sorts (look at our political leaders, many popular figures, etc.), who resides outside of us. We long for love. We look for recognition. And we have been tutored to believe that we are smaller and far less powerful than we actually are...believing we only matter if we are seen by them (this even happens in our personal relationships, right?)

So as we do the work of justice, solidarity, and organizing, I wonder what happens as we keep on taking the power back— even as we fight the systems, engage in intentional power analyses of systems of oppression, and the like? For in so doing, in remembering our own power and rooting ourselves in profound self-recognition, I believe that we have the opportunity to refuse giving more power to, or giving our power away to external powers that we fight.

Does this make sense?

It's like this: for so long I fought for recognition in the midst of systems in which I had experienced profound mis/non-recognition on account of my gender. I desired to be seen, to be known, to be loved as I am. Yet I wasn't.

And while of course I/we all long for recognition and love as we are, the reality is that the external forces might never give it to us.

And as long as we live out of need for recognition of those systems and persons who refuse us, then they remain more powerful than they ought to be.

Our invitation then is to do as many of us have learned through our activist forbearers, through philosophers and theologians, through psychologists, and through those we love: **we take our power back**. We listen to our bodies, we cultivate the capacities to trust our own skin. We give ourselves recognition. We share this recognition with each other and honor one another. We dance. We dream. We fight. We organize. We listen. And we begin to more deeply breathe this truth...we are far more powerful than we even realize.

May we take the power back. May we refuse the systems and ideologies that tell us the external powers are what give or take recognition. **And may we become people who offer the solidarity of honoring the divine power that is each of us.**

This is what I think Jesus meant when he told the Samaritan Woman that the true worshipers don't worship on the mountains of religious communities, but in "Spirit and in Truth." He was saying- **you already have and know it; it's in you. It is you.**

The power and possibility of whole worlds is growing and birthing in you. So keep on gestating. And let's be midwives to each other in the struggle of birthing new worlds together.

You already are. You are already.

So keep on. Keep on. Keep on.

With you in the work, Sara WG

Posted in **Ethics, Faith, Formation, Justice, Uncategorized** [Leave a comment](#)

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When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. **2** And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. **3** They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” **4** When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. **5** As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. **6** But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. **7** But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” **8** So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

“For They Were Afraid”
Rev. Sara Wilhelm Garbers

One of the many things you might not know about me is that one of my favorite film genres is spy thrillers. I particularly especially like James Bond movies... which sometimes surprises a few people! So when I saw that there's a new film coming out with Jon Hamm, *Beirut*, I paid attention and listened when Jon was interviewed on MPR. I don't know how many of you know Jon Hamm. He's an actor who rose on the public scene through the TV show *MadMen*, which chronicled an era that some of you know more intimately than me (it was set in the 1960s and 70s before I was alive!).

You might not know much about Hamm...so let me tell you some of his story. He had been in Hollywood for many years and he had some small jobs, but he was thinking of quitting and going home. At one point he said it was “soul crushing” to have gone Hollywood, seeking to be an actor, and he is doing random jobs at 30-something that he never would've expected. He stayed though because he figured someone had to make it and it might as well be him. Well into his 30s he had the opportunity to play Don Draper in *MadMen*, a role that would become iconic and propelled him toward Hollywood stardom such that he's now starring in a major motion picture.

And why am I telling you this story (other than my love for movie thrillers)? Well because I wanted to highlight a case of someone where if you had known him 20 years ago, he would have had a very different story from the one he has now. These many years later his story is the stuff of the victor—he's a figure now who many of us know. BUT just 15 years ago none of us could have expected this to become his story.¹

¹ See: [Beirut & Jon Hamm Interview on NPR](#) and [“Jon Hamm’s overdue Emmy win is a case study on how to overcome career failure”](#).

I share this is because where we start a story or where we end it really matters. Sometimes you hear a story of success and triumph and you only hear about the good stuff and the glory. We don't tell the stories about the times when we started businesses and failed; the times were we were actually terrified and didn't know what would happen next. We don't often tell the stories about how we were a sophomore in college and spent a lot of Friday nights crying in our dorm room. We don't tell the stories about how right now everything looks bleak and hopeless...yet these are parts of our stories. And the reality is that life is actually a lot messier and uncertain. It's not always so glorious, and we for sure never actually know the ending until it happens.

So we come to Mark 16:1-8 today and one of the reasons that I wanted to focus on just those first eight verses is because if you'll pick up your pew Bible you'll notice something unique that you don't see this all the time in scripture—though Mark 16 ends at verse eight, there in brackets is listed the “shorter ending” of Mark and then the longer ending of Mark (verses 9-19). Then there's an excessive footnote section that talks about how some of the ancient authorities bring the book to close the end of verse eight.

I wanted to stop at verse eight today for a few reasons. Partially, because textually speaking this ending has the most support of its being the original. Additionally, I think this ending best fits with the story and the theology of Mark. For unlike the other Gospels, this one doesn't end with the vision of resurrection; we don't see the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus. No, this one ends with the women and disciples being afraid. Finally, I also think ending at verse eight is really good news for us because it preaches a particular kind of gospel...one that resonates with our lives wherein we know what it is to not know the ending, the one in which we are terrified and uncertain about what will happen. So let me talk a little bit more about this.

As I noted, the first reason why I think ending at first eight is the right place to stop is tied to what we call the “Synoptic Problem”. The Synoptic Gospels are Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Synoptic means that they share a lot of common stories about Jesus and his ministry in time on earth. The “Synoptic Problem” is the task wherein scholars try to understand the relationship between the overlapping yet differing stories in the Synoptic Gospels in order to understand more of the purpose and narrative arc of each (for instance, Matthew's telling us about Jesus is different than what Luke says-- not that they are totally different, but they are speaking to different communities, they have different aims and themes). If you want to learn more about this, I would encourage you to read through a Gospel at a time and notice and pay attention to the things that one of the Gospels might be uplifting *differently* than they are spoken about another Gospel—i.e.- what are the themes, etc. (it's a ton of fun!)?

In looking at the texts, the consensus amongst scholars is that Mark was written first. Mark provides a lot of the material content for what ends up being written in Matthew and in Luke. Matthew and Luke have a lot of the same material that is in Mark plus some additional sections

that scholars have reference as source Q.² Q may have been some of the sayings or the oral stories about the teachings of Jesus that get added in a Matthew and Luke but are absent from the book of Mark. So in part because Mark is the first book I think it makes sense to have an ending like Mark 16:8 where we don't know the rest of the story --because Christians are still living in the *midst* of this story of seeking to understand who Jesus is and what Jesus means for their community.

A second reason why I think ending with verse eight makes sense is because of what we know from textual criticism (I promise that my whole sermon won't be about very nerdy stuff!). Textual criticism is a discipline where scholars look at the old manuscripts of the Bible to try and ascertain what was in the original version. Textual criticism matters because Christians didn't have Xerox machines back in Jesus time (!) but humans who transcribed the Biblical texts by hand (called scribes). Sometimes scribes made errors-- they would jump lines and miss something, or they changed a few words because they didn't like what the scroll said, or maybe they had an oral tradition in their community about how a passage was supposed to be understood and they would help to "fix" a written copy. And with the book of Mark, it seems clear that some early Christian communities thought that the ending of the book needed a better story because who ends a book of the Bible with "and they were terrified. The End."? It may be that for these early Christians (and others throughout history, including us), there's a little bit too much absence of resurrection and a little bit too much fear in the ending "they were terrified and told no one", and so they thought they would clean it up by adding to it what they had in other stories like those in Luke and Matthew. Yet when we look at the earliest manuscripts of the full book of Mark, they don't include these latter verses.³ This is why our Bibles note in brackets: [oh by the way- there's some verses here that we know weren't in the original version, but we know many of you grew up reading these verses in the King James Version and so we list them here for you].⁴

So not only due to the timing of when it was written, and on account of the textual evidence, but I think there is also a third reason that ending Mark at verse 8 can be helpful and important.

² Q- from German *Quelle*, meaning source. In Matthew and Luke there is quite a bit of textual overlap that signals to a body of work, probably the oral traditions and stories/teachings of Jesus that were consulted and mined in the writing of these two books.

³ Scholars are divided on the question of whether the "Longer Ending" was created deliberately to finish the Gospel of Mark (as contended by James Kelhoffer) or if it began its existence as a freestanding text which was used to "patch" the otherwise abruptly ending text of Mark. FYI- *Codex Sinaiticus* and *Codex Vaticanus*, the earliest complete manuscripts of Mark. Other manuscripts that omit the last twelve verses include: minuscule 304 (12th century), Syriac Sinaiticus (from the late 4th-century), and a Sahidic manuscript. In addition to these, over 100 Armenian manuscripts, as well as the two oldest Georgian manuscripts, also omit the appendix.

⁴ This is an interesting and longer conversation because our knowledge of ancient manuscripts has greatly expanded since the King James Version of the Bible was published. Yet we have these histories of what the texts "say" and so when new translations of the Bible, based on better knowledge of textual tradition and likely original text end up demonstrating differing readings from the KJV, it can cause a lot of controversy. This is why, for instance, even though it is clear from textual evidence that the Israelites didn't cross the Red Sea, but the Sea of Reeds in Ex. 13:18, publishers of translations like the NIV will only list this as a footnote to avoid blow-back from people who might get upset about this "new" interpretation.

The reason is that, as I alluded to earlier, each of the Gospels has a different way of bringing us into the story of who Jesus was and is.

In Greek the gospels are not titled “Matthew” “Mark” “Luke”, but “The Good News (Gospel) according to Matthew (or Mark, or Luke)”.⁵ It’s as simple as if Andy (my spouse) were telling his story of faith in Jesus, it’s going to be different than mine because we are different people with different, but overlapping, stories about God’s working in our lives and the world. Likewise, each of these books is speaking to a particular audience—Matthew was written to Gentiles and Luke’s audience was more Jewish. And the good news according to Mark likewise has it’s own story to tell.

Unlike Matthew and Luke, there’s no genealogy given at the beginning of the story, there’s no virgin birth, and it seems that this book was written to a Gentile audience because many of the Jewish rituals are explained in more depth than they are in Luke. In view of this, when we look at Mark and some of the themes in the book, ending at verse eight makes the most sense.

In part that’s because throughout gospel, Mark tells us the story of **Jesus as the “Suffering Servant”** letting us know that Jesus was the Son of God. Right away at the beginning of the book Mark references a passage from Isaiah—a book that talks about the “Suffering Servant”, making the connection between Isaiah and Jesus. Many commentators think that Mark does this is to counter the notion that Jesus is some miracle man who saves and heals everyone like a magician. No, instead Mark wants to remind the people of the early church (who were probably living under the rein of terror under Emperor Nero) that suffering was part of the life of faith. By referencing these passages from Isaiah it reminds the early church that Jesus is the Suffering Servant, and that as people who follow Christ, Christians should also expect to suffer.

There’s also a notion of the “**Messianic Secret**” throughout the book of Mark. Very often in the book of Mark we don’t yet know the fullness of the story of Jesus as Jesus himself frequently tells people not to let anyone know that he is the Messiah: “Shhh, he tells those he heals...” This hiddenness of Jesus’ true identity is woven throughout the entire book of Mark.

Another big theme in the book of Mark is a depiction of **what the kingdom of God looks like**. As we spoken about on Palm Sunday and Easter morning, the revolution of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God is one that comes in silence.⁶ The revolution begins in a mustard seed. The Kingdom of God in Mark doesn’t look like a kingdom that you’d expect; it’s not a kingdom that overthrew the Roman Empire in a moment. Instead this kingdom is headed by the King of the Jews...a King who was crucified.

The Romans say of Jesus is Mark 15: “He saved others but can’t save himself!” “If you’re the King of Israel then come down from the cross that we may see and believe!” Even in Mark 15:34 (unlike the other Gospels) Jesus cries out: “My God my God why have you forsaken me?”

⁵ τὸ κατὰ Μάρκον εὐαγγέλιον.

⁶ Rev. Carter preached about this at the Easter Sunrise Service.

Thus there's a sense in Mark more than any of the other Gospels that the kingdom of God 524 comes in silence; it comes secret; it comes in the quiet; it comes where God feels absent. So when we look at the whole of the text and the story Mark is telling us about Jesus and the Kingdom of God, it's not very surprising that it ends with "they were terrified" because the kingdom of God didn't appear to have won.

This is a book that's also focused on the end times, on Jesus as the deliverer of the people (this is what's called the *eschatology* of the book). But again, this kingdom looks different than you'd expect....it isn't obvious that God's promised coming wins the day.

Another feature of the book of Mark is how often **everybody's afraid**. Peter's denials are predicted and Peter responds with: "Even if I have to die I'll never disown you." And all of the other disciples say the same. But then, of course, they all fall asleep in Gethsemane for "their spirits are willing but their flesh is weak." And when Jesus is arrested in Mark 14, everyone deserts him and flees and Peter denies Jesus. Yet in Mark 14, the women--Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James and Joseph, and Salome-- are watching from a distance. Joseph of Arimathea places Jesus in a grave, and the next morning (after the Sabbath) the women come to the tomb with spices to anoint Jesus' body.

We don't know all of the reasons the women are afraid and trembling, but I wonder at some potential reasons for why: there was a guy in white at the tomb, and Jesus wasn't there, and they don't know what's going on. I mean, I'd be a little afraid. And they probably also thought that God was going to win the day and overthrow Rome, but now Jesus is gone, and they are guilty of insurrection against the Roman Empire. I would be afraid too because you probably aren't going to have a good end to your life if you're caught up in all of this. The women don't know what's happening; they aren't sure—and even though the text doesn't specify all of the reasons as to why, we know for sure that they were terrified and said nothing to anyone.

To sum this up: I think that ending at verse eight is right for because textually it seems to be the case and because it also resonates with the theology of the book of Mark that reminds us the Kingdom of God comes in the quiet, in the suffering—the Kingdom of God doesn't overthrow the Empire via force and wins right now. Of course Mark ends by telling us they were afraid, for **this** is the Gospel according to Mark. *And now let me say a little bit about why I think that this is actually really good news.*

How many of us have been afraid?

I have.

How many of us have known moments in our stories like Jon Hamm who I referenced earlier—where we were "sick to our stomach" because our life wasn't going the way we thought or hoped it would?

I have.

How many of us thought God showing up in our lives would look like healing?

How many of us thought it would look like the people we love remaining with us?

I have.

The Gospel and the good news according to Mark is that the Suffering Servant is also *Emmanuel*, the God *with us* in our suffering. The God *with us* in our fear. I think that having this as one of the Gospel options can be really good news in those moments when we don't yet know what happens next. We trust it, we believe the promise...but it doesn't feel real yet. The tomb is empty and we haven't seen Jesus. We are filled with longing, but we don't feel the hope of the promise, we only know the fear. And what good news it is to know that we aren't alone in being afraid and that God meets us...even in those places of pain.

For me, if I think about being a mom this morning in Syria, what good news does the Gospel speak to my life? The good news that Mark would bring to me is that precisely in the midst of my own suffering and pain, in the midst of a story that is still being written where the terror is present, God still with me. For if God is only to be found in triumph and glory, then as a mother from Syria, this God would feel too far off to care for my suffering. But a God who is good news shows up in the midst of our not yet knowing the end, a God who shows up in the suffering...for that kind of good news I would long.

Yesterday at our Visioning Retreat, we talked about how the life of faith is a risk. It asks something of us. Actually following Jesus isn't always just glory upon glory, and knowing Jesus doesn't necessarily makes everything easier. For actually doing the work of discipleship—of giving my things to the poor as Jesus commands, of caring about the pain and suffering in the world-- this challenging and often I don't want to go there, I don't want to face the suffering. But the life of following Christ invites us into those spaces, it invites us to lose our lives so that we can find them, and it meets us in the fear that we know so well.

Fear shows up in many forms. Sometimes it's the fear of what happens if I cross the room and you reject me. What happens if I'm vulnerable one more time in a relationship where I have felt unseen for a long time?

The good news comes in and tells us: **"I know you're afraid, but keep going... it's not the end of the story!"**

One of my favorite quote reads like this:

*Leave safety behind. Put your body on the line. Stand before the people you fear and speak your mind--even if your voice shakes. When you least expect it, someone may actually listen to what you have to say.
Well-aimed slingshots can topple giants.*

I've often thought I could only speak if I wasn't afraid. I've often thought that the way to move into relationships is when I know I'm safe. I've often thought that the way forward in my life is when I know I'm in a place of strength.

And the good news of the Gospel reminds us:

we speak even though our voice shakes,

we love even though it's risky

we move forward together because *we are afraid*

and God is with us in THIS.

This God who came in on a donkey of peace.

This God whose revolution started in whispers.

This is the God meets us where we are afraid.

As a good Minnesotan, there's one more thing I want to say about all of this that is tied to the weather: One of my favorite things about blizzards and snowstorms is what happens right after the storm allows us to outside. It's the moment when those of us the snow blowers blow sidewalks of our neighbors, shovel out the person who's stuck at the end of their driveway. We all come out of our houses- and for me this energy and excitement at that moment when we get to help each other. And to me this is another promise we have: we might be afraid but we don't need to be afraid alone.

Together as community we face whatever the weather brings, whatever our lives bring to us. We walk with each other and we remind each other in the darkest moments that **God is still with us.**

I know you're afraid. I'm afraid too. But hold my hand and let us walk this path together.

THIS is the good news of the Gospel of Jesus according to Mark: they were afraid, and we are too. AND God meets us in our fear and brings tidings of good news: You are loved. You are seen, and the God of all things has walked amongst us and knows our suffering and pain, so let's walk together and face the terror...even as we tremble and are afraid.

[The Good News according to Mark. Amen.]

A LITANY FOR MOTHER'S DAY

To you who have nurtured us, who have struggled so that we might live and flourish in the world.

To you who have cared for our bodies and souls, who have given of yourself to make our future possible.

To you, our mothers who birthed us.

To you, our mothers who adopted us as your own.

To you, our mothers by choice, who by your embodied action have cared for all who came into your life.

Congregation: We see you. We honor you. May God's rich love surround you this day.

To you who know the pain of longing...

Who longed to birth life, but found yourself unable to conceive.

Who desired to be called mother, but have never known that name.

Who long for the homecoming of a child who has chosen a pathway of pain.

Who ache over the absence of a mother who was or is unable to love you as you are.

Who yearn for the day when you will see your mother again, whether you separated now by death or a broken relationship.

Congregation: We see you. We honor you. May God's rich love hold you this day.

To you who have lost...

To you who have lost children:

whether before they were able to breathe outside of the womb,

whether your child left this earth too soon,

OR whether the loss is fraught with the ache of absence in the midst of their still being here on earth

Congregation: We see you. We honor you. May God's rich love comfort you this day.
To you...our mothers.

Our aunts

Our neighbors

Our grandmothers

Our teachers

Our leaders

Our healers

Our friends

To you who fight

And nurture

Who love

And pray

To your beauty

To your complexity

To your vulnerability and your power

To your belovedness as ones made in God's image

In the midst of your pain and brokenness

Longing for your joy and healing and wholeness

Congregation: We see you. We honor you. May God's rich love be yours this day.

To our mother, Eve. To Mary, who brought our Christ into this world.

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To the women of our faith. To Sarah and Hagar. To Deborah and Jael, Rebecca and Leah, Ruth and Esther. To Junia and the Sophia. To Mary the Mother of James, Mary Magdalene, and Salome. To Miriam. To Phoebe. To the woman at the well, the Syrophynecian woman, and the woman who bled. To the women unnamed both in scripture, in our lives, and in our collective story.

Congregation: We see you. We honor you. We give God thanks for your life and legacy.

To the Syrian mother, to the mother in Russia, in North Korea, in Vietnam, in Congo, in Sudan, in Somalia, in the UAE and in Iran. To mothers and those who nurture peace and the conditions of life around the world.

To the mothers whose children will never return from war.

To the mothers who face death to secure their children safe passage and food.

To the immigrant, the widow, the refugee.

To the mothers who give their lives trying to make the world better for future generations.

Congregation: We see you. We honor you. May God's rich love surround and uphold you this day.

And to you, oh God and Mother of us all.

To you, the one who has fashioned all humanity in your image. (Gen 1:27)

To you, the God who bears us, who births us in your love. (I John & Deut. 32:18 & Isaiah 42:14)

To you, the God who teaches us to walk, feeds us, and leads us in kindness. (Hosea 11:3-4)

To you, oh God who protects us with the fierceness of a mama bear. (Hosea 13:8)

To you, the God who cares for us like a mother eagle or hen, you who gather us and spread your wings lest we should fall. (Deut. 32:11-12 & Matthew 23:37 & Luke 13:34)

To you, the God of all comfort. (Isaiah 66:13 & 2 Cor. 1)

To you, Oh God who remembers us as a mother does her nursing child. (Isaiah 49:15 & Psalm 131:2)

To you, the God, who has looked for us as a woman looks for her lost coin. (Luke 15:8-10) 530

To you, who rejoices when you find us...and we find you as you whisper to us you have said to us since the beginning of time:

Congregation: "Welcome home, beloved."

To you we run, to you we offer our lives and love. To you we give thanks oh Sophia wisdom and Spirit, praying in the vein that Christ, your son, has taught us:

Our Mother/Father, who art in heaven.

Hallowed be your name

Your kingdom come

Your will be done

On earth as it is in heaven

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

And lead us not into temptation,

But deliver us from the evil one

For thine is the kingdom

And the power

And the glory.

Now and forever.

Amen.



Breathe In

Joshua 1:7-9

Only be strong and very courageous. Be careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left so that you may be successful wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth. You shall meditate on it day and night so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous and then you shall be successful. I hear by command you, be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened or dismayed for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.

- Joshua 1:7-9

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Let's pray. God, this morning, we together breathe in your presence. May your love, your light, your Spirit, your breath fill every fiber and sinew, every tendon, every ounce, every dream—both of what we hold individually and what we hold collectively. God of life and breath who has been breathing in and on us new life, breathe in and on us ever and ever again. For it's in Christ's name we gather and pray. Amen.

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Well, hi, good morning! Again, a heartfelt welcome to Colonial Church. My name is Sara and I'm one of the ministers here at Colonial. I'm glad to be in worship with you this fine summer morning. For those of you who don't know, we've been in a season and a time called Reforming; a space of intentionally discerning together what God is inviting us to next. The Reforming Task Force just finished the final of three retreats. It was actually three plus plus retreats because of many things that transpired over the past months (deaths, blizzards in April, etc.- if you haven't heard Kevin Graham Ford's, our consultant, summary yet, you can listen to it online). During the retreats as we prayerfully sat with all of the feedback the congregation shared we kept returning to this idea of *breathing in* and *breathing out*, meaning that we want to be a people who are transformed and changed by the love of God, by God's Spirit, by God's healing, by God's restoration in our own lives and we want to live that out in the world.

And so given that, Daniel let me have the pulpit this morning. I thought, "I'm going to talk about *breathing in* today." And in so doing, my aim is to invite us into a bit of a journey. I'll acknowledge at the forefront that this is an incomplete analogy. So for those of you who appreciate good theater, grant me some suspended disbelief in my capacity to tell a good story, okay? That's always a good preamble, right? The jokes not great, but you should laugh anyway...



Well, here's the story... And for those of you who don't know me, I like to do fly-bys of entire portions of the Bible in one sermon. So that's what we're going to do this morning. I want to start way back in Genesis with a person that some of you may have heard of before...the father of our faith, as we profess in our congregational affirmations at baptism, Abraham.

Once upon a time, Abraham had God make a promise to Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars—that he would have a land and a people. That his people, who had been nomads, who had traveled through the desert through this land, looking for a place to settle...that they would indeed have a place to land. And this idea of this land, of the space, of this place, where God would give them persists throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.

And so we continue our journey through the text. We get to the time where you hear about Joseph (spoiler alert: the Bible doesn't actually talk about his amazing Technicolor dream coat like in the musical, but he did have a very amazing coat and his brothers were jealous). Joseph ends up getting sold into slavery by his brothers and winds up in Egypt. And then there is a famine in the land where his family is still living. They don't have any food. Cue stage left where Joseph, as it turns out, ended up getting favor with the pharaoh and the pharaoh puts Joseph in a place of power and esteem. So Joseph's family comes to town to try and get food and, unbeknownst to them, their brother is now a big deal in Egypt. So they go to the guy who will help them get food, who as it turns out is...(you know, right?!) their brother. They don't recognize him as they ask him for food. He suddenly he reveals to him who he is and they get food. Cue music crescendo...

But the story doesn't end there! The family ends up moving to Egypt. Sometimes we forget this part of the story, that the way that the people of Israel ended up in Egypt was because Egypt was a good land. It was the place that God had brought them to where there was food enough for them; it was a land of sustenance and goodness. But over time, the Egyptians forgot the story of Joseph. They forgot the goodness of who he had been in the community and the people of Israel ended up becoming enslaved by the Egyptians. It's in that space that God again shows up and says, "I AM," and through Moses, he tells the people that he's heard their cries and is going to rescue them from slavery and bring them to a new land, a land of prosperity that is flowing with milk and honey (meaning it's fecund and fertile). This is another chapter then in God's fulfilling the promise that was made to Abraham. Remember, how God said they would have a land? And so the people of Israel exit from Egypt, the land of slavery, and begin the exodus to the promised land.

This journey takes them 40 years, which sounds a little longer than one I would want to go on. They go through the wilderness and they complain and they want to go back. Now again remember, not only did they want to go back to a land that they had known, but they also had a memory of the goodness of what had happened in that land. And here we are in the passage that was just read, it's the moment right before. The moment right before the new land, where they sent out scouts to check out the land, a land that indeed was flowing with milk and honey, but also had giants



which was just a little bit terrifying. And they are told to be strong and courageous. "Do not be afraid for I, the Lord, am with you and I'm going to go with you into this new land."

Now here's some of the connection that I want to make between this story and ours.

Some of you have been in this community for a long time and there have been, and there were years of great beauty and power where you in your own life felt what it meant to have God's Spirit breathe the breath of life and goodness and freedom. And there have also been years of wilderness. Years where you longed for another day, a former time. And we're not sure yet what's next.

I want to begin then my first affirming that in moments like this current time as we ask what's next, that it's normal to be afraid. It's normal to be on the precipice of a new land and not be sure if the giants will kill us. What will happen? Will I be part of the story of what God's goodness will do in this new space? And sometimes we just want to go back.

And God challenges and invites us to be strong. One of the things I wanted to affirm this morning is that no matter what you're feeling right now as we're in the season, that you're not alone. If you're afraid or nervous or upset or angry or hopeful or positive or anything in between, that is part of the human condition. That's why in Joshua these words are said, because they actually are afraid because they have forgotten to breathe. And maybe some of you don't forget things. Maybe God shows up and you remember for your entire life. And in that case, bless you for being a really wonderful human. I, however am not that human. Just to say, God has shown up in my life in powerful ways. I have experienced grace and healing love that I didn't think was possible. This winter, I got stuck. I got stuck in my own brain.

I'm working on a dissertation (hypothetically) but I actually haven't been because I've quit breathing. While the reasons for this are many and complex, fundamentally I haven't wanted to think about it or deal with it. I have felt shame and fear. And lovingly God has brought people back into my life who reminded me of who I am, of where God is showing up. And they remind me, "Sara, you can breathe. You're loved. You're seen by God." In the psychological literature it talks about how whenever we forget to breathe, we go back and operate out of our reptilian brains. Then we react because we're afraid. We're terrified. All we can see is that we feel under threat and are desperate to survive. It is precisely into these places that God's breath and Spirit breathes in, on and through us and invites us to remember, invites us to live from our frontal cortex and not just react but to thoughtfully respond in love and faith as we can then remember that God has and will continue to show up. Breath reminds us that we're not alone and we can breathe for there is so much goodness in the new land and the giants won't be able to harm us.

So yes, they were afraid and so are we. Israel was on the precipice of a new land, not knowing what would happen. We as a community are in the precipice of a new time and a new way of life and we don't know what will happen. And in our lives, maybe



many of you are in the midst of things that you remember: the goodness of what was, and you aren't sure what will be next. It's in this space where I think God shows up. God who breathes on us. Do you know that the word in the Old Testament for the Spirit is *ruach*...another translation for this is breath? Just like in Genesis where we are told that God hovered over that waters and breathed (*ruach*).

If we fast forward to the New Testament, are told that the people were breathed upon and received the Holy Spirit. For when the breath of God moves in space, we're transformed from people who live with our fists clenched in fear and self-protection and we can then open up to what God has for us and turn toward one another. For me, one of the ways I move from my reptilian brain to the frontal lobe of faith and trust is literally by breathing. When I'm feeling anxious, I think of the image from Psalm 1, where it talks about the tree that's planted by the waters. And what I'll do is I'll literally root in my feet, stretch out my hands like I'm a tree and breathe. Praying that God will remind me that I am rooted, that I am loved. And if you've never tried this, there's actually a Ted Talk about how, if you take two minutes to do your super hero pose, I do my tree by the Psalm One, living water thing. And it reminds me, it reminds us to breathe in, to trust the goodness of God, even in the midst of the giants in the land.

As I was working on this sermon and thinking about fear and possibility of promise and breath, I was reminded of a sermon that was preached on April 3rd, 1968. Some of you may remember what happened on April 4th, 1968. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated that day. But the night before, April 3rd, he preached that he'd been to the mountaintop, and he had seen the promised land. And even if he didn't get there, he knew that God was there. And so he said, "Well, I don't know yet what will happen now, we have some difficult days ahead, but that doesn't really matter with me now because I've been to the mountaintop and I don't mind. But I want you to know that tonight that we, as a people, we are going to get to that promised land."¹

And likewise, we too, in many ways are at the precipice of things in our lives where we don't know what will happen. And my hope and prayer is that as a people, as individuals and as a community, that we will remember to breathe because the land just over that hill, God's goodness is there for each of us. Goodness that feeds our souls, that nourishes our hearts and lives. And we don't do this alone.

A number of years ago, I heard a sermon from Chuck Swindoll. He talked about how the Israelites were just like us. They forgot. And so what you see throughout the Old Testament they built altars of remembrance. Every time that God shows up, they market, they put down stones because they're like "We're going to forget this." So next time we walk back, we'll be like, "Oh, that's right. God is actually for us." So that's why today as you came in, you received a stone.²

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop," Speech delivered April 3, 1968, at the Mason Temple in Memphis, TN. For the full transcript, see: <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/ive-been-mountaintop-address-delivered-bishop-charles-mason-temple>

² I don't remember which sermon this was, but he's often written and spoken on this concept.



If you don't have a stone, you can get one on your way out and I'll tell you what

we're going to do with them. But first, I want you to know why I thought it would be good for us to each take a stone together. The first reason is because in this season of Reforming we've been doing spiritual practices together that have reminded us that God is Potter and God is our Rock; that God is our foundation and is forming us. God gives us strength, no matter what happens. So I want us to have our own physical reminder that as we go into this new land we build upon the rock of the God who holds and sustains us. The second reason I wanted us to each take a rock with us today is because these rocks represent our remembrance. And I want to invite each of us today to hold our rocks and remember the ways in which God's love has shown up in our lives, the way God's goodness has shown up in this place and to hold those together as prayers and hopes and affirmations of remembering this God who has breathed and will continue to breathe in and on us.

In a minute, we're going to have an opportunity to listen to a song as a way of reflecting. And what I'm inviting you to do is to take your rock, and if you don't have one right now, just hold a space for it in your open hands and you can get one after the service. I want you to prayerfully consider: what have you forgotten? Where have you quit breathing in your life? Where are you afraid? What are the posters that you think might be in the new land? Where is God's Spirit inviting you to breathe?

Breathe in, breathe in. For just over there, on the other side of the mountain, I promise- there is a new land where the God of all love will be with all and each of us. So let's prayerfully consider together how we might be invited to be strong and courageous as we move into the new land together, as we listen to this song by Emilie Sandé called "Breathing Underwater."³

³ Emeli Sandé, "Breathing Underwater," *Long Live the Angels* (London: Virgin Records, 2016).



Breathe Out

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

From now on therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. Everything old has passed away, see, everything has become new. All of this is from God, who reconciled us through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making God's appeal through us. We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake, God made him to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in Christ, we might become the righteousness of God.

-2 Corinthians 5:16-21

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Well, again, good morning to all of you and a happiest of Father's Days! Whether as a man, you have participated in the creation or adoption of children of your own, whether you have chosen to invite into your life other children or persons, we give great thanks for you men who have chosen to be transformed and continually transformed by the love of God and Christ.

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Will you pray with me?

Oh, God and truest father of us all, on this morning we come before you together. God, breathe on us and in us. May your loving touch heal and restore us. God, may we indeed be the ambassadors of reconciliation, a vision of a way of being in the world that reflects love, that reflects your goodness, and truth, and the fullness of who you are. So, may we today together breathe in your Spirit and then together breathe out and embody the fullness of all of the things to which you have called us. For it's in the name of Christ we pray and give thanks. Amen.

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Well, I was pretty excited about getting to preach today, because at some churches, the only day women get to preach on Mother's Day, but here I get to preach on all sorts of days, and getting to preach as a woman on Father's Day is just awesome. I'm so excited to be here and offer encouragement and invitation on this day. For it's such a gift to be in this community where as men and women- all people- we get to be fully who we are and live out that vision of the body of Christ, together.

So to bring us back to our sermon at hand, for those of you who weren't here last



week, we talked a little bit about this idea of *breathing in*. This notion of breathing in came out (see what I did there?!) in the midst of the surveys and the focus groups that we engaged with as a part of ReForming. Then, through the deeper listening to both the history of this place and also God's invitations, that as a visioning team kept coming to this idea that as a church we want to be a people who breathe in Spirit and are transformed and changed.

And then, as a people we want to want breathe out that kind of love, and reconciliation, and compassion, and healing in the world. So, today I want to talk about *breathing out* and an aspect and a way that we can, and might, and indeed (I would entreat) ought to live. I want then to talk a little bit about *being christian*, and particularly *being christian in the midst of a world that's incredibly divided*. Now, maybe you have been living in your own universe, in which you've experienced no division in any relationship in your life or with any person or witnessed any divisions in our culture. The rest of you maybe have been living in the same milieu and experience that I have, right?

For some of you, maybe the experience of division that you've witnessed in the world, or in your family, or inside your own self has been incredibly painful. I know at times it has been for me. In the midst of this reality, one of my hopes, and prayers, and personal longings is that I want to be the kind of people who represent a vision like we read about in II Corinthians: of a people who no longer regard one another from a human point of view, but we see people as images of God and strive to bring to earth God's kingdom, just as we pray each week.

A person who deeply embodied a vision of the kingdom of God was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Has anyone ever read Dietrich Bonhoeffer or know of him? I like to think of authors as my friends, so here's a picture of Dietrich, my friend. He was a German pastor, and theologian, and ethicist.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was born in 1906. He spent some formative time in the United States at Union Theological Seminary, and worshipped in black churches in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance and was deeply impacted by encountering racial divisions and racism in America.¹ This time transformed him to want to be a person who believed in and embodied the fullness of the gospel. One of his most famous works is a book on being Christian is called *Discipleship*.² He says, the call to follow Christ is simple obedience. Grace is costly, it asks all of us. As this quote says, salvation is free, but discipleship will cost your life. He was a person who wanted us as a church to be continually transformed by the love of God and Christ and to be the kind of people who were for our neighbors in the way that we lived our lives, so much so that, as you may know, during the rise of national socialism in Germany, ~~Dietrich Bonhoeffer was~~ part of a movement called the Confessing Church.

¹ For a wonderful exploration of the influence on Bonhoeffer, see: Reggie L. Williams, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 4*, Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, Eds., trans. Barbara Green and Reinhold Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).



The Confessing Church existed as a critique of the Lutheran State Church, which in many ways was just completely wedded with German nationalism. The Confessing Church said, “We may be German, but we are first citizens of heaven, and our call and our role is to be people who follow Christ above all things.” Dietrich wrestled with this throughout his career, which was short-lived, as he was killed the day before the Allies liberated his prison. I bring up Dietrich, because I think his life offers an invitation and a challenge to all of us to wrestle with what does it mean to be Christian? What does it mean to live in a world where there are divides, but to be people who, as we breathe in the Spirit, we breathe out the love of God and the vision for God’s kingdom in our world?

As some of you know, my doctoral work is in ethics and I was speaking with our theologian in residence and United Seminary Dean, Kyle Roberts, this week about how I was going to do a very quick fly by of Ethics 101 in the sermon. So, we’ll be here until about 3pm... I hope you have enough coloring crayons for everybody, Laura! Brunch will be served in the midst, we’ll have a Father’s Day brunch. I don’t know who’s making it, but yeah, that’s what we’ll do. Ok, I’m just kidding (sort of). I promise to be done by 2pm...

All joking aside, I wanted to highlight a few aspects of the ethical life in our time together this morning, one of them is I wanted to bring up another figure that some of you may know of from back when he was actually doing his work, which I think is so cool. Reinhold, Niebuhr, anyone know Reinhold Niebuhr? I see those hands!

Reinhold Niebuhr was featured on the cover of *Time* in 1948...just a few years before I was born (well, close to 35, actually). Reinhold Niebuhr was a pastor, professor, and public theologian. He worked during early 21st century when there were significant divides in our culture and in the church. In his earlier work he sought to challenge Christians and the Church to hold this space between the divides of his time: the modernist/fundamentalist divides. In the early 20th century, part of the church reacted to modernist assumptions with a fundamentalist rejection of science, reason and assumptions about the world and knowledge as they were changing in culture. This part of the church (think of the Scopes Monkey Trial) was withdrawing from culture saying, “No, we don’t want anything to do with science and culture!” And Niebuhr critiqued them, but he also critiqued the liberal church at his time who, he believed, had forgotten their rootedness as Christ-followers, and instead merely preached a social gospel that was rooted in an overly optimistic view of humanity.

Niebuhr challenged the church to be the church, to be rooted in the “perfectionistic ethic of love of Christ.”³ And then, to wrestle deeply with what does it mean to follow Christ in their time. He was a contemporary of Barth who is famously known for saying, “hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, and you pray and

³ Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013).



you discern that God will give you wisdom for how to be Christian.”⁴

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I love Reinhold Niebuhr’s work because it challenges us that we are supposed to be a people who are rooted in our faith. We are supposed to above all strive to embody a vision of the kingdom of heaven here on earth. And together we wrestle with that. So that’s one element that I want to pause and bring into our conversation. For as we wrestle together with being Christian, we ask ourselves: What does the love ethic of Jesus invite and call us to as we live our lives together, as people who are deeply rooted in scripture and committed to being Christian in our time?

I want to turn to a couple of other ethicists as well. One is H. Richard Niebuhr (who is also Reinhold Niebuhr’s brother...they were a very theological family, including their sister, Hulda Clara August Niebuhr who wrote and taught on Christian Education of children and youth).⁵ H. Richard’s book, *The Responsible Self* talks about how our work as Christ-followers is to respond to the love of God that God has shown us and to live that out in the world; that we are responsible to this God and responsible then to our neighbors, to embody the love of Christ and live as responsible selves before God in view of what God has done and God’s love of us.⁶ Part of the question he issues to us, his readers, is that if we’re going to live responsibly as Christ-followers in our world, we have to understand what is going on. In other words, truth and culture are categories about which Christians ought to be deeply concerned. Wrestling with what is actually here, asking how do we make sense of it, and then: how do we respond? Following in his wake is ethicist Christian Emilie Townes. She likewise challenges and invites us to ask ourselves what is going on in the world and then to ask ourselves what our responsibility is in view of what is going on, what is my responsibility as a Christian to participate?⁷

So from Reinhold Niebuhr we have an invitation to embody the love ethic of Christ in our time and from his brother and Emilie Townes we have a challenge to actually live responsible lives in view of what is going on in our time out or a response to what Christ has done for and in us. Summary: we are called to live love in response to God’s love, and to do so in the real of our time. Everyone tracking so far? Good!

⁴ Though even the Center for Barth Studies is unsure of exactly where this popular quote originated, they offer the opinion that it came from a *Time* article from Friday, May 31, 1963 which reads: “[Barth] recalls that 40 years ago he advised young theologians ‘to take your Bible and take your newspaper, and read both. But interpret newspapers from your Bible...Newspapers, he says, are so important that ‘I always pray for the sick, the poor, journalists, authorities of the state and the church - in that order. Journalists form public opinion. They hold terribly important positions. Nevertheless, a theologian should never be formed by the world around him - either East or West. He should make his vocation to show both East and West that they can live without a clash. Where the peace of God is proclaimed, there is peace on earth is implicit. Have we forgotten the Christmas message?’” Accessed 6/16/2018. See: <http://barth.ptsem.edu/about-cbs/faq>.

⁵ To read more about Hulda Clara August Niebuhr, visit: <https://www.biola.edu/talbot/ce20/database/hulda-clara-august-niebuhr>.

⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1999).

⁷ Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2006).



The last thread that I want to highlight as it relates to Ethics 101 and our call to **540 breathe out** comes to us from Charles Curran, Charles Curran was a Catholic ethicist who was excommunicated and now teaches at Southern Methodist University. He wrote a book called *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today*.⁸ One of the aspects of this book that I wanted to bring forward today is how he talks about how Christians are called to have an **ethical stance**. Basically he says, when we take a look at Scripture, what are the themes? What is the overarching story of God's work in the world? And those moments, that arc of the story of God as we understand it (to Curran: our ethical stance) then how we understand what it means to be Christian (Reinhold Niebuhr) and how we live as responsible as Christians in response to Christ in our time (H. Richard Niebuhr and Townes). Got it? 1) How we understand the story of God shapes; 2) How we understand ourselves, and; 3) How we then live responsibly in our time, right now.

So what is God's? What is the horizon that you are seeing the world from? What is God calling us to be in the world? Charles Curran argues that the **ethical stance** of the Christian self-understanding should be rooted in a five places: 1) Creation; 2) Sin; 3) Christ; 4) Redemption; 4) Resurrection. We start with creation, all things are created by God. Then there's the fall: sin, brokenness. But there's the promise and Incarnation: God became incarnate in Christ which makes the way for redemption, redemption in Christ, restoration of relationships, and then eventually we have the promise of resurrection and the fulfillment of all things in God.

So how about you? What is the story of God that makes up your ethical horizon? This matters! For me, my ethical stance is rooted in this: 1) God is Creator God: For me, my ethical horizon begins with there is a God who is creator, who has fashioned all of humanity and all of creation in God's image, therefore, all life matters because God has created. 2) Brokenness: Then human brokenness happened, we see that in Genesis: we harm each other. The garden way of life was stolen from us, so we hurt each other. We don't live in right relationship with God and one another. And yet 3) Restoration is Coming: the echo we see throughout the old Testament is restoration is coming, restoration is coming, restoration is coming. 4) God-With-Us and the Invitation to Come Home: And then comes Christ, the embodiment of God's perfect love on earth to show us the way home, to remind us that we were meant to walk with God in the garden. 5) The Work is Redemption and Restoration: In Christ, we get to do know that through baptism and through the work of the Holy Spirit, we are one body and one church and one faith called to the ministry of reconciliation, witnessing to the God who is the God of all people and all of creation and all of humanity. 6) All Ready/Not Yet: And one day, all will be made right, but in the meantime, we live the final reality and seek to walk in the garden with God and with one another. And, for me, this is my ethical horizon; it's my vision and the story I live about what it means to be christian. How about you? Can you articulate what you think the story is? For what you think the story is will fundamentally shape and alter how you live and show up in the world.

⁸ Charles E. Curran, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today: A Synthesis* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1999).



So when we move and walk in the world, what is our vision? When we come to⁵⁴¹ challenges about politics and policies, is our faith shaping how we move? Is it challenging us to be people who are committed to a vision of the kingdom of God? May it be true of us that this is so. I like to think of this as developing a holistic, Christian ethic. This ethical horizon, the story we believe and live about faith is important for how we live, but also because it shapes how we interpret the rest of Scripture. For instance, the Bible says you should sell all you have and give it to the poor. I still have clothes, I live in a house, but the Bible says I should sell it all...what do I do with that? Am I sinning and not following scripture? How do I make sense of that passage or myself if I'm not doing what it says (because, let's be honest, none of us do all of what it says)? What about passages like: "Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigners, or the poor, do not plot evil against one another."? How do you live your life in response to that?

What do we do with the way that Israel invaded the land that God had promised them? Some of that is really hard to wade through, right? So we have these different Scriptures and having an ethical horizon, getting into the thick of what is the story of what this God is about, helps us to be able to discern and wrestle with the texts so that we can actually be Christian in our time and discern how we should live. This is part of why that ethical horizon matters. So, that's the first piece. I want to ask you to consider this week, what is your ethical horizon? What are the things about Christian faith that shape how you move in the world and how you make decisions about the way that you live in the midst of the divides and divisions?

The second element from Curran's work that's really helpful in thinking about being Christian is to move from thinking of our *ethical horizon* (the story of God in the world that shapes how we see) to *ethical grounding*. The ethical grounding is the place that says, if this is the story, what roots the story? What does the story tell us about God? And what do we learn from Scripture about who God is? If God is love, as the Bible suggests, then what is the content and nature of love? And if we're striving to be like Christ and embody the love of God, what does that ask of us? What does it mean to be Christian in view of who this God is? This is our grounding that roots us as people of faith in God's story. And then fundamentally as we strive to be Christian, we do so out of a place of our *ethical center*, the ethical center being Christ saying to us that the law and the prophets are all hung upon this: that you should love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself, right? That's easy and super hard, right?

So what's your *horizon*? What's the story of God that you would tell? And where are you *grounded*, what roots you in this story? And what is the *center*, the point of this story that invites you to live your faith in the world? This will show you your ethical stance and will then shape how you show up and live your faith in the world.

Figuring out how to love God and love neighbor isn't easy. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer challenged us, salvation is free, but discipleship is costly. So to actually be Christian, to wrestle with really tough issues like immigration policy will mean that we might disagree, and in fact, we will disagree on matters like what right and just immigration



policies ought to be in our country (the ability to disagree and be in community is part of the legacy of this place, which is amazing). But what if we were a church continued to challenge and shape and push and invite one another so that *amongst our disagreements*, we push each other to have political positions that strive to be first above all, to be Christian? What this means is that Christians of good conscience can and will disagree about exactly how their country ought to deal with migration and borders, BUT our political positions cannot violate our Christian ethic. So, it is not tenable for a Christian to say about migrants from south of our border: "Let them die in the desert! because if everyone is made in the image of God, then our policy positions must first be rooted in the creator God who has created all of humanity in God's image. Do you see what I mean? Are we willing to let the ethical vision of the gospel shape our way of living responsibly in the world?"

As A Christian, I am, we are all called to love our neighbors, and this call then ought to shape how we think about to conversations around abortion, domestic violence, poverty, the economy, etc...our call as Christians, as we breathe in the love of God is to have it so fundamentally shape us that it impacts the whole of how we live our lives. It's not easy, yet our call is to love God and to love our neighbors, our call is to **be Christian**. In this way, we are invited to be a people who have an *ethical horizon* rooted in the stories of who this God is and the vision God calls us to live. We are to then live, *grounded* in who God is, living from the *center* and we seek to live out the fulfillment of all of the law and the prophets by loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

And finally, we are to these take this grounding to ask questions about what is going on in the world and who we are responsible to, what God is asking us to do in response to our neighbors, in this time. Charles Curran, who I referenced earlier says it this way:

Yes, absolute moral norms do exist. However, they cannot be based on the physical structure or object of the act...Law can never be the primary model for a moral theology, but a relationality-responsibility model can and should recognize the existence of some absolute norms. However, such norms are not the primary reality in moral theology.⁹

What he's saying is that everything we do as Christians, our ethical lives, are about to whom we're responsible and what our relationship is: first our orientation to God and then our orientation to neighbor and to one another.

Now you might be saying, "Sara, why are we talking about all this stuff about ethics and politics?" That's a valid question. So often in our world we hear the word politics like it's a dirty word, something that isn't connected to faith. You might hear it and thing to yourself: "Oh, I want to stay out of politics, I just want to follow Jesus!" And while I respect your heart in that, if this is true of you, I want to challenge us today that if we are going to *breathe out* faith, we have to care about ethics and politics

⁹ Curran, *Catholic Moral Tradition Today*, 166.



because the call to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves demands ethical living and political response for how we live with one another is the sphere of politics. Jesus himself came on a donkey, refuting the vision of the political salvation that people thought would happen. He came in, in a different way, but we are invited and indeed called to be Christian in our time. As even Dietrich Bonhoeffer had said, to not act is to act, to not speak is to speak.

And so, as Christians, we are called to not just breathe in God's love, but to breathe it out in our world; to wrestle deeply with what it means to show up and respond, to be Christian in our world. For though to be Christian is NOT to be partisan, it is always a call to be political, for the loving of our neighbors demands ethical, political responses from us.

May we be a people who continue to invite and challenge ourselves related to our policies, to ask ourselves how we are or are not integrating the Biblical vision, the Biblical story into how we live and respond the the gospel with our lives in building the kingdom of God. Do your political positions reflect the gospel? How are they shaped by your faith? What is the Christian source for your opinions about the economy, housing, food, climate change, migration, reproductive rights, and the like. Of course, none of our politics or policy positions will be able to fully reflect or represent the full vision of the Christian faith, for we live in a complicated and broken world, but our faith ought to stand in deep challenge and invitation to us in forming our way of being human and living our faith in this world in this time. To be Christian is to be political, it's not to be partisan....to breathe out faith is to live our lives in response to the call and challenge to be people of the gospel.

This past week the Southern Baptists held their convention and during his address, their new president J.D. Greear said:

We believe that Jesus is the Lord of the whole earth. He is the King of Kings and he is the Lord of Lords. We believe that he, not any version of Caesar, is the Messiah. He is the Christ, the son of the living God, that salvation is found in him, not in the Republican platform or the Democratic platform, and that salvation did not come riding in on the wings of Air Force One. It came cradled in a manger."¹⁰

When I heard this quote on MPR this week I responded aloud to my car speakers: "Amen JD."

Amen, indeed, for as Christ-followers, we are called to *breathe in* the love of God in Christ and to the *breathe out* this love in the world as we love God and love our neighbors.

¹⁰ Quoted in NPR article and on Morning Edition: "Pence Speech Riles Some as Souther Baptists' Moderates Gain Strength," (Accessed on 6/16/2018).

<https://www.npr.org/2018/06/14/619806451/pence-speech-riles-some-as-southern-baptists-moderates-gain-strength>



And as our passage from today challenged, we are to be a people who no longer regard one another from a human point of view, but to see each other in view of the story of what God is working in our world, to be a people who make God's appeal: to be a people who *breathe in* the transformational love of Christ, and then *breathe out* that out in the world. To be a people who are so for the goodness of our neighbors, that people look at us and say: "There is the love of God!" This is the heart of the ethical life and the heart of faith: to be Christian in the way we live our lives, as we *breathe out*.

To live this faith invites us to be centered in Christ and the love of God and to then strive to be consistent in our ethics and the way we live our lives. We're all going to fail at breathing out the fullness of the grace and faith we breathe in, but let's aim for consistency in what we say we believe and how we're living our lives.

We are then also invited to remain curious and humble about what God is doing in the world, and God's invitations to us. Because sometimes we are going to disagree deeply about how we should live out our faith and it will be a struggle to remain connected in the midst of our differences. But if we get curious and remain humble with and towards one another, this allows space for the Holy Spirit to change us so that we might be compassionate with both ourselves and one another, and our neighbors, especially across divides in our world.

Indeed, might we be courageous in being a people who are truly rooted in the gospel of Christ, committed to being Christian in our world, *breathing out* the love of God in this time.

We are called to be church, to be the embodiment of God and God's love here on this earth. Some of you may know this verse: "They will know that we are God's disciples, by our love." (John 13:35) or this one: "Love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore love is the fulfillment of the law." (Romans 13:10) Love does no wrong to others, and again the John passage it invites us to embrace that though we may, and we will disagree—what might it look like if we are a people that refuses to be defined by divisions, but one that comes together to witness to the love of God and Christ, and to be Christian, to *breathe out* though our individual and collective lives a love that reflects the love and goodness of God towards all of our neighbors?

The last thing I want to say about the call to breathe out love on this Father's Day is by way of a personal narration of how this plays out in my life...As a Christ-follower, one of my political commitments is that I identify as a feminist...sort of strange to say on Father's Day, right? But here's WHY I am a Christian who is also a feminist: because I believe everyone is made in the image of God and the reality of history and the truth of our present time is that the world hasn't always allowed for women to be free, to be who they are as image-bearers of God. And as a Christ-follower, I believe that God wants us all to be free to live the fullness of the image of God that God has placed in each of us. I want women to be free and I want men to be free, to be the fullness of the image of God in their lives too. And I tell you what, in this congregation and in this community, I have witnessed men who have been



transformed by the love of God and Christ where the lies of the world have and are falling away from you and how you live in the world. You live, rejecting the like that say things like: "Men don't cry. Men don't have emotions, men are removed from their families. Men are only competitive, men only kill one another." None of this is gospel stuff.

And in the short time I've been a part of this community, I've seen men who love, men who stand in gaps, men who are committed to seeing people know the transforming work of God. And I want us all to be free. So, you might say, "Sara, why do you have to call herself a feminist?" Fair enough, and you don't have to agree with me. I'm just telling you, I'm trying to be a Jesus person in that way in my life. So, whatever it is that you believe, whatever our positions that we take, let's be the church. Let's be a people who are committed to honoring and seeing the image of God and to building the kingdom of God here on earth as it is in heaven. Let's be a people who breathe out love in this world, in our time, for all of our neighbors and this earth.

So let's be the church, let's strive to *breathe out* faith that is rooted in a wholistic Christian ethic that is: Centered, Consistent, Curious, Compassionate, and Courageous. Let's be the church.

One final note before I close today: at the very end of his life, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote a letter from jail about what it means to be Christian and he said:

What reconciliation and redemption mean, rebirth and Holy Spirit, love for one's enemies, cross and resurrection, what it means to live in Christ and follow Christ, all that is so difficult and remote that we hardly dare speak of it anymore. In these words and actions handed down to us, we sense something totally new and revolutionary, but we cannot yet grasp it and express it. This is our own fault. Our church has been fighting during these years only for its self-preservation, as if that were an end in itself. It has become incapable of bringing the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and to the world. So the words we used before must lose their power, be silenced, and we can be Christians today only in two ways, through prayer and in doing justice among human beings. All Christian thinking, talking, and organizing must be born anew, out of that prayer and action.¹¹

So, as we close this time, I wanted you to hear again from our students, a prayer, an invitation that we would breathe out, that we would be Christian in this world. Let us do that together, giving witness to this God of love, who so loved us, that he became embodied amongst us and called us to be reconciled. Let's be the church and *breathe out* love in our world. Amen.

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Vol. 8*, John W. De Grouchy, ed., trans. by Isabel Best, et. al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).



Showing Up in the Arena

Matthew 25:14-30

For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them, to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then, he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents, but the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time, the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them.

Then, the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents. See, I have made five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave. You enter into the joy of your master,' and the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents. See, I have made two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave.'

You have been trustworthy in a few things.' Then, the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours,' but his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow and gather what I did not scatter? Then, you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return, I would have received what was my own with interest, so take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the 10 talents, for to all those who have more will be given and they will have an abundance, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'"

- Matthew 25:14-30

God, you know what each of us bring into this room this morning together, and so, by your Spirit which ever loves and ever invites us, God, meet us and continue to transform us, that we may indeed be people who show up, who live the lives to which you invite us, and who together are the "Yes!" to your prayer that your kingdom would come. For it's in Christ's name that we gather and pray. Amen.

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Well, if you haven't noticed, I'm wearing a Pyro fanny pack.

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Now, I didn't originally get a fanny pack because I wasn't cool enough, but Jeff helped me out, and I had one on my chair this morning!

So I really wanted to wear it because everyone else is wearing it this whole week, and we are doing Pyro Sunday today, so I have my Pyro fanny pack on because we are all going to go to camp together this morning,
Okay, so welcome to Pyro!

[Response] Yeah.

Are you excited? Woohoo! Now, here's the deal, Carter Sample. This is Carter, if you don't know, right there. Carter, I would say accosted {maybe a little of a strong word) found me and decided to invite me to consider something (would be a warmer way to say it). My first week here at Colonial, Carter said, "Sara, what do you think about coming to Pyro and being our speaker?"

Like any new staff person, I said, "Sure. Why not? That sounds great!"

When last Saturday came, and I woke up, I wasn't thinking very nice thoughts about Carter Sample, and I was wondering why I had said yes to going, because as you know, we're in the season of Reforming, and there's a lot of really good work we're working on together, and I was feeling overwhelmed about that. Then, if I'm really honest with you, I was terrified.

You see, Pyro camp for a bunch of sixth through ninth graders. And while I'm not as old as some of you here in worship today, as it turns out, my middle school days are many years behind me and so I was a little terrified about speaking at camp ... I mean, honestly, who wants to go in front of a bunch of middle schoolers and be the idiot grown-up who's like, "Hey!" and they all fall asleep or they start throwing things at you, because that's one thing about grown-ups, is even if they hate your sermon, they generally don't throw things at you during it, you know what I mean? So I said yes. I showed up at church the morning when everyone was leaving, and as I was driving in I saw the signs that some of the other counselors were holding up, "Welcome to Pyro!" they said. I was like, "We should do this every Sunday!" Immediately, I just knew that I had shown up for the right thing.

For me, this week has been a real gift because, in part, it reminded me of the very first moment when I knew I wanted to do ministry for my life's work. I was 19 years old and was staff at a junior high youth camp for my church. I was able to lead worship that week and I saw the power and beauty of what happened when young people --for the very first time often in their lives-- began to take ownership of their faith and life, believing that God loved them, and watching what happened as they stood up a little bit more, engaging with one another with kindness.

When I originally was working on this sermon, I was going to talk about the Brené Brown's book, *Daring Greatly*, which we are reading together as a congregation this



summer.¹ That's where the sermon title "Showing Up in the Arena," comes from. *Daring Greatly* is a text about the ways in which many of us, throughout our lives, we've experienced pain, we've experienced scarcity, whether it was in our families or in school. Maybe you were bullied, maybe beaten down and so we begin to put on armor to protect ourselves from the shame we've felt in our lives. Even as we're people who might say, "I follow Christ," the reality is that we're all still humans who are in process. We have our brokenness and our woundedness, and sometimes that prevents us from showing up to our lives and in relationship with one another in vulnerability.

But then this past week I realized as I was with the students, that the work we were doing together at the Pyro Games (our theme for the summer) was actually a really wonderful embodiment of the themes of this book, and— I thought— a really good invitation for all of us who are grown-ups (and those of you who aren't) about how we might show up in the arena of our live. So today, I want to invite you to the Pyro Games...

How many of you have actually read or seen *The Hunger Games*?² Oh, that's more of you than I thought. Great! Well, when I knew *The Pyro Games* was going to be the theme for camp I was a bit nervous about that because if you do the math, the campers who are going into sixth grade, are about 12 years old, and *The Hunger Games* came out in movie form six years ago. so I was thinking, "Oh my gosh, what if they don't know this at all? And what if then all of my talks don't make any sense?"

Then, I get up to camp and I'm impressed: they all know *The Hunger Games* (your kids are very well-informed in pop culture, so congratulations!). Now for those of you who don't know anything about *The Hunger Games*, I'm going to tell you a little bit. *The Hunger Games* is a dystopian young adult novel series about what happens in this land called Panem when there had been this massive war, and the Capitol ended up ruling over 12 districts. On account of the rebellion, the Capitol would demand yearly tributes (one boy and one girl) from each of the districts who had to play in a game to the death.

Sounds like a good kid story, am I right?! They play in this game to the death, and the point was to remind the districts of what they had done and that they were under the thumb of the Capitol. For 73 years, this yearly spectacle had worked to keep any resistance at bay, and the people of the districts lived in a high surveillance state in deep poverty and service of the capital.

Night One: When God Calls Your Name

On the day when the tributes from District 12 will be announced for the 74th Annual Hunger Games, a young woman named Katniss Everdeen volunteers her life in tribute in place of her younger sister whose name had been called. And so we began our first night at camp, talking about the story of *The Hunger Games* and about how,

¹ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly* (New York: Penguin, 2012).

² *The Hunger Games* (Hollywood, CA: Lionsgate, 2012).



unlike *The Hunger Games*, when God calls your name, it's not to kill you, but it's actually about wanting you to have life. The question that I posed to the students I now pose to you: When God calls your name, will you give your life in tribute?

Will you say yes?

Together, we visited a passage that some of you know from Isaiah 6: 1-8. It goes like this:

1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. **2** Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. **3** And they were calling to one another:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

4 At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

5 “Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”

6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. **7** With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”

And I said, “Here am I. Send me!”

On our first night of camp, we talked about this God of love, who many of you have known in your lives, the God who calls each of us by name. The first question that I want you to consider then is: “How are you going to respond? Will you say, ‘Here I am. Send me?’”

“Will we be people who’ll continually give our lives in a response of yes to this God who calls and invites us to live this life?” I’m going to ask you to do what I asked the kids to do, the youth to do, is for those of you, you may remember that they do this salute in *The Hunger Games*. It’s a salute of honor or tribute, and so I’m going to say,

“Will you give your life in tribute to follow God?”

If you’re in, then you go like this, “Here I am. Send me.”



Okay? Questions? You have a question, or were you just raising your hand? Oh, you were just ready. Okay.

“Will you be a people who will give your lives in tribute and say yes to this God’s invitation when your name is called?” If so, raise your hand and let’s together say, “Here I am. Send me.”

Congregation: “Here I am. Send me.”

Congratulations, tributes. You have successfully completed night one. But don’t go anywhere yet, there’s more! We have more nights.

Night 2- Refuse to Play the Game By It’s Rules

Night two I said, “Okay, so if God calls our name, and part of the power of what happens is that Katniss, when she ends up in *The Hunger Games*, she refuses to play the game by the rules.” Because, right, the rules of the game are kill or be killed, and yet, a powerful thing happens in the story of *The Hunger Games* where Katniss doesn’t play that way.

No, instead she actually makes friendships and forms alliances. She’s trying to not kill anyone if at all possible, because she’s like, “This whole game is messed up. This isn’t the way that it’s supposed to be.” Now, in talking about this, what I said to the students is that, as it says in the book *Daring Greatly* is the power of what happens when we are people who show up in the arena, knowing that we are loved by God...it begins to change the way that we can live and show up in relationship with one another, the ways in which we’re willing to fly our flags and say, “Here’s who I am. Here’s me with all of my quirks, all of my weirdness, all of my stuff.”

And yet, so many of us have spent our lives hiding because we’ve been told to be someone other than we are, so I told the story about the ways in which I had learned to be a good girl, through stories like the Salem Witch Trials, where you hear about what happens when women aren’t good girls. At a very young age, I remember being scared of stories like this. So I told them about my first Sunday when I was preaching and getting ordained here at Colonial Church, as I was driving to church—and some of you have heard this journey of mine, of what it meant to me to be able to come and be a pastor here, what a gift it has been to be able to be who I am and to be in community—I listened to a song from Taylor Swift. Anybody like Taylor Swift other than me? She has a song called “I Did Something Bad” in which part of the lyrics say:

They’re burning all the witches, even if you aren’t one. They’ve got their pitchforks and proof, their receipts and reasons. They’re burning all the witches, even if you aren’t one...so light me up. Light me up. Go ahead and light me up.³

³ Taylor Swift, “I Did Something Bad,” *Reputation* (Nashville, TN: Big Machine Records, 2017).



The point she's making here, and the power of it is that so often, we've learned to hide who we are for fear of our certain death. We learn and internalize beliefs where we say, "No, stay here. Be small. Don't be who you are because you might get hurt. It might be painful."

The power of the song reminds us that when you just own it and say aloud: "Here's who I am," and you show up that way, usually, the bullies back down, right? They usually leave you alone because they realize you're not afraid. That's what happens when we're people who refuse to play the game by the rules, when we're people who in a place where we're supposed to kill each other, we say, "No. I'm going to be free to be who I am, so you also can be free to be who you are because we're all loved by God." That's what happens in *The Hunger Games*, and that was the invitation that we talked about as with the students: what does it look like to live like that and not play the game by its rules? Who says it has to be this way? What are the things that you've believed about who you have to be?

Well, in Mark we find an invitation to refuse to play the game by the rules of this world. From Mark 8:34-38.

34 Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. 36 What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? 37 Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? 38 If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.

Now, I grew up hearing this passage, thinking that being who I was, was sinful, but what I've realized in following Christ is that what Christ is actually inviting us to, is instead of being the people we thought we had to be, or who our parents or who society tells us, that following Christ is about dying to that stuff that others have put on us and we've put on ourselves so we can actually live, so we can actually be free to be who we are. That's the invitation that's here for each of us, is to be people who lose our lives to find them. And so on night two, I asked the students a question that I wanted to ask all of you, which is, "Will you be a people who refuse to play the game by the rules, and instead, play the game the way that God wrote in you to play it, to show up for your life, being the person who God has invited and created you to be?",

And so I asked them, "Will you follow Jesus? Will you find your life in Jesus and play that game and be who you are?"

And so I ask you that question today, and if you're in, then you're going to respond the same way, "Here I am. Send me."

Repetition helps, even grown-ups, right?



So... Will you be a people who will be disciples of Jesus, refusing to play the game by the rules, and instead, being who God has and called and invited you to be? If so, let's join together. "Here I am. Send me."

Congregation: "Here I am. Send me."

Night #3- On Friendship & Love

It's fun to watch a bunch of grown-ups doing *The Hunger Games* salute, so way to go you! We're now on to night three. On night three I talked about how 1) if we're a people who know that our names are called by God, 2) who are refusing to play the game by the rules because we know who God is inviting us to be, then 3) this allows us to be people of love, to be people who are actually in relationship with God and with one another in a different sort of way.

That night, as we were talking about being people whose names are called by God and following this God, we talked about, again how that opens us up to love. This made me think about the passage in John 15, where it talks about this is love that you lay down your life for your friends, and the invitation that we have to each of us to remain in God's love, and how that's something for each of us, and so we talked about what is the content of this love? What does it mean to be people who call ourselves Christian? Jesus talks a lot in this passage about we remain in God's love and we follow God's commands, and yet, He's so clear here, the command is love one another.

So we talked at length about what it mean to be Christian: It's like we love one another. We follow God and we love one another. Remain in Christ. There you go. Pretty easy, right?

Well, actually living this is really hard, but this is our invitation and the challenge that we have. As we're transformed by this love of God, this love invites us to relate differently to one another. I talked at length with the students about how love ... Love is for you, right? The love that we have in God is for us.

God is for you, and that love is always for your good, so those friends who bully you (grown-ups, hopefully none of your friends bully you, but if your friends do, your friends who bully you, if anyone tries to get you to be someone other than who you are, they're not for your good, FYI). That's not love. Abuse is not love, because it's never too early to help reminding us what love looks like, right? Love is for you, even in the hard times, because love is that which is willing to lay down its life for one another. Again, here's what Jesus says, "Greater love has no one than this than they lay down their life for their friends."

I asked us, if we were going to be people who, because God called our name and we're transformed, will we be people who love and are for each other, people who are for each other's good and celebrate the goodness that happens in each other's



lives, and that we're going to be people who show up for one another even when times are hard? Even when times are hard. What I asked the students are these questions. "Will we be a people who are for others, a people who are for the good of others, and then a people who are for each other, even in the hard times?"

If you're willing to be a person who will choose love, to remain in God's love and love one another? If so, please respond, "Here I am. Send me."

Congregation: "Here I am. Send me."

May we truly be Christian in our lives.

Night 4: There's Enough For Everyone

Okay. We're getting there! The next night, night four brought us further in, for 1) if we believe we're loved by God, 2) if we're beginning to quit playing the game by the rules, 3) if we're actually living this love, then 3) we become people who believe that there's enough for everyone, because you being who you are doesn't take away from who I am, so I told the story about young Sara.

That's current Sara, and young Andy, mostly because I missed Andy and wanted to talk about him. Well...that and because we both were t two young people, who through our lives, had learned to hide; people who didn't believe that we were enough or worthy of love. And while I responded by trying to be perfect and the good girl, Andy responded by trying to be the wingman and the sports guy, and just kind of like, to go under the radar. That's me at my first youth camp that I worked at. The bottom right is actually me at a youth group "un-prom" gathering (yes, it's root beer in the keg).

This is Andy. We had a little bit different journeys and pathways, but the point is we all have journeys and pathways that we go on, and ways that we've learned to hide because of the pain in our lives. But this call of Christ is for us to become people who can actually be in relationship with one another, celebrating the goodness of each other's lives because there's actually enough for each of us. There's enough pie for everyone.

There's enough love from God. There's enough, and you being who you are doesn't take away from who I am because we're all made in the image of God and all of us are loved.

The power of *The Hunger Games* is that as people began to be who they were and stand up, the districts started revolting. 74 years of nothing and suddenly, together, they began to do something different—as they say in the film: "Fire is catching."

And so I asked the students on night four of camp: what would happen if we lived from this place of knowing that God loves us. How might that change the world?



Romans 12 talks about this very idea:

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1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. 4 For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. 6 We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; 7 ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; 8 the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God;[g] for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” 20 No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

I talked about the film, *The Greatest Showman*.⁴ It's a lovely film about these folks who had been rejected because they didn't fit societal norms and they come together, knowing that they matter in the world, and they begin to show up in the world and don't believe that they are a threat to one another, and so I asked them, "Will you be a people who refuse to conform, and instead, are transformed by this love of God? Will you be a people who are changed and transformed, who act as if there is enough for all of us because we're rooted in this love of God.

So, congregation- "Will you be transformed?"

⁴ *The Greatest Showman* (Hollywood, CA: 20th Century Fox, 2017).



If so, together, let's say, "Here I am. Send me."

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Congregation: "Here I am. Send me."

Night 5: We Change the World...Together

Okay. The final night, the final countdown! On the final night, the staff kept saying to the youth is that only one of them was going to get to go home because it had to be just like *The Hunger Games*. Sorry- there are moments when if you stop and think about what you are joking about at camp and it was out of context it doesn't sound so good, eh?!

I thought I was super witty on the final night because I talked about how, tying in with Tony Jones' devotional from the morning when Christ prayed for our unity, and how on the final night we were going to talk about how we change the world together, I said: "Yes, only one of us is going home...because we will go home as one body to change the world together!" Corny, I know.

Yet it's true, right? That's the power of what happens in *The Hunger Games*, that it's when they begin to come together that they're actually able to overthrow the Capitol, because it wasn't that one person stood up to be who they were, it was that they all, following the courage of one, began to be a people who together, were able to overthrow the Capitol.

I talked about how, when Katniss shows up, she lives out her "By Faith..." moment. I asked the students, "What's your 'By Faith'?" Some of you know Hebrews 11. It says, "By faith, Moses, by faith, Abraham, by faith, Sarah, by faith, by faith, by faith, by faith, by faith, by faith," summarizing chapter 11. Here's the whole thing:

¹Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ²Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. ³By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

⁴By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks. ⁵By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and "he was not found, because God had taken him." For it was attested before he was taken away that "he had pleased God." ⁶And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. ⁷By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith.



8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. **9** By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. **10** For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. **11** By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. **12** Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

13 All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, **14** for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. **15** If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. **16** But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

17 By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, **18** of whom he had been told, “It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.” **19** He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back. **20** By faith Isaac invoked blessings for the future on Jacob and Esau. **21** By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, “bowing in worship over the top of his staff.” **22** By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave instructions about his burial.

23 By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth, because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king’s edict. **24** By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh’s daughter, **25** choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. **26** He considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward. **27** By faith he left Egypt, unafraid of the king’s anger; for he persevered as though he saw him who is invisible. **28** By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.

29 By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. **30** By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. **31** By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.



32 And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— **33** who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, **34** quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. **35** Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. **36** Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. **37** They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— **38** of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

39 Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, **40** since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

12 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, **2** looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

3 Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

Moving on to chapter 12, "So therefore, since we're surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses," which includes all of these people, Moses, Abraham, Sarah, all of those, but it's all of us. We aren't alone in this. We don't go home alone, we don't move alone. We do this together. That allows us to throw off the things that hinder, and entangle, and ensnare us as a people, and so I asked them a question that I want to ask us this morning,

What is your by faith? What is the ways in which you, like that servant with talents, that you are asked to continue until the end of your life, whether you are 85 or five?"

What is the by faith story God is writing in your life?

What is it that you're being called to stand up and do in response to this God who has called your name?

Then, I invited them to do something that we'll do at the very end of the service together. I told them about how at Colonial, at the end of every Sunday service, we hold hands, because the reminder is that we don't go alone. We don't do this alone because we weren't meant to do it alone.



That's the power of what it means to be in community with one another. The thing is ... We walk by faith and we walk together, and so the final question I asked them was not an I one, but was a WE question.

Will **we** be a people who will walk by faith?

Will **we** be a people who walk together?

Will **we**, Colonial Church, be a people who walk by faith?

Will **we** be a people who in this season and in this journey, walk together because as *The Hunger Games* reminds us, the Capitol loses, and this God that we follow, this kingdom isn't a flesh and bones? It's about the whole of our lives and following this God, being a people who together, are the yes to God's prayer, "May your kingdom come and your will be done."

So let's be Christian together. Let's be the Church. Let's be people who show up in the arena of the lives that we are called to live, showing up with our hearts as people who are transformed by the love of Christ, saying yes to follow God, saying no to the rules of the game and the way it is, and instead, responding with one another ...

How do we respond?

"Here I am. Send me."

Congregation: "Here I am. Send me."

"Here we are. Send us."

Congregation: "Here we are. Send us."

Here we all are. You've all survived camp...all of our tributes have lived.

There's a lot more to unpack obviously, but I wanted you to get a little bit of a taste of what the students, what we all did together this week, because I also think that as grown-ups, we're not that different. We all need to be reminded that God calls our names, that we are loved by God, that we are called to say, "Here I am. Send me," and we do this together in community, so may we be a people who are indeed the yes to Jesus' prayer. May we know we are loved. May we be Christian.

May we be transformed.

And may the odds be ever in our favor.

Here we are. Send us. Amen, and amen.

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Sara Wilhelm Garbers



September 19, 2018September 19, 2018

Writing for a Storm: Six Moments of Grief and

Resistance

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Moment I

I watch the short videos on my Weather Channel app– I watch them in bed by the glow of my phone at night, barely audible so as to not wake my sleeping partner (Perhaps you too know the ones).

Fires.

Hurricanes.

I huddle there, curled up into myself, much as I did on the night of 2016 when I wept at the news of our new president.

And I suppose I know in my skin what this means, the story it tells.

I wish I had something more to say than this, but right now, as always, I am left without words.

Moment II

And maybe that's just it—this act of watching extreme weather represents my nighttime ritual of **grief**—a silent witnessing that I perform during these barely-waking hours...

When I hold my breath.

And I wonder at what another storm | fire | hurricane | famine means.

And then I re-remember....

Because I know already.

I know what this means. I am afraid of these symbolic manifestations of the earth crying out in its *Silent Spring*.^[1] (https://mnipl.org/2018/09/writing-for-a-storm-six-moments-of-grief-and-resistance/#_ftn1)

And my skin too knows this is true—it whispers a knowing recognition of a planet and of bodies (of all living things) too long pillaged, too long exploited. As if these bodies could be (or are) possible of being sublimated into the way of knowing which ignores that the body, indeed, *Keeps Score*.^[2] (https://mnipl.org/2018/09/writing-for-a-storm-six-moments-of-grief-and-resistance/#_ftn2)

I guess what I'm saying is that I've been weeping and grieving and surviving in many ways in both my own life, and as I listen to the cries of the earth and of my fellow humans.

Moment III

Yesterday I was invited to make a collage in response to Psalm 23.

I made a warrior like Furiosa in Mad Max.

And in her I saw myself | In myself I saw her.

I saw her immediately—my knowing knew and cognized her.

As survivor, yet as one who refuses the world as it is and keeps turning towards the myths and the monsters...

At times to confront and resist.

At times to befriend and release.

At times to grieve and weep.

And at times to co-create other worlds of possibility.

Moment IV

Do you know this story, the story of Furiosa in Mad Max?

In a post-apocalyptic desert of a world undone by climate change, people became *things* as the earth already had. The resources were controlled and scarce and humans became consigned to roles, life and humanity stolen from them.

Furiosa devises a plan to steal the women who were forced to be breeders of the new humans for this desolate land.

She's taking them to the land of her mothers.

They write on the wall as the exit: "We are NOT THINGS."

I wear that saying on around my neck on days when I need to remember:

We are not,

this earth is not

thing.

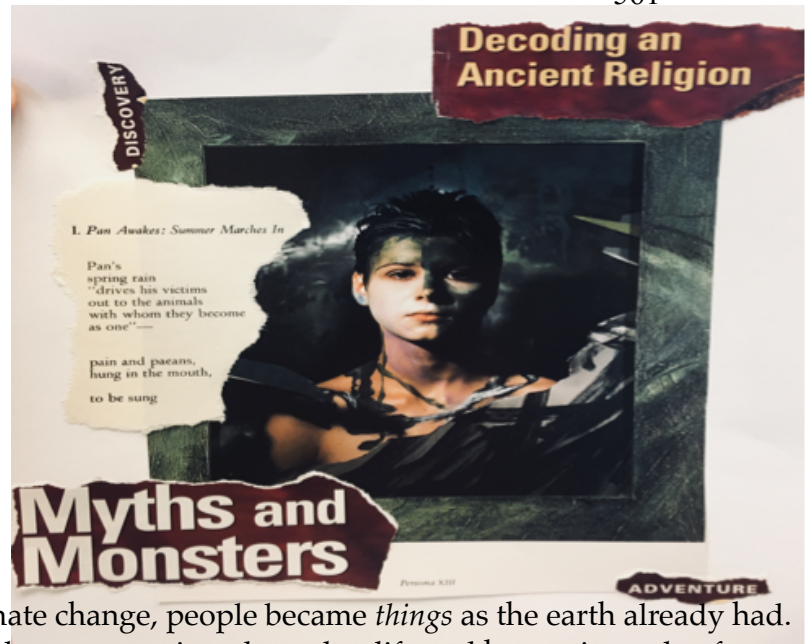
It is *subject*, meaning its own entity in the construction of not only sentences but also in respect of this: subjectivity that resists objectification.

So we say: "We are NOT things. We are not objects for using."

"This earth is not a thing | some object for using."

And when Furiosa realizes that the land of her mothers is gone, she weeps in a guttural way that is not allowed for a woman on screen.

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And after the weeping: they go back to the place they ran from.

They return to overthrow the one who cosines all to be *things* in a universe of scarcity and objectification.

And when this happens, well... there is **water enough for all to drink**.

Moment V

And maybe this is it:

That as I sleep and watch the news of storms while curled up in a fetal position, my body knows something of what it needs—for the womb I fashion as I grieve, it nurtures me. Indeed, the wombs they nurture us as we sleep and move into the darkness.

And then we awake in the morning, and by doing so we bear and birth ourselves into life once more.

And with this new day we then co-create and midwife with one another a world in which water is for us all.

Moment VI

I suppose this doesn't solve climate change in itself, but it gives me resolve—

To resist

To create

And to work for a world where we

listen to our bodies, we

listen to each other, and we

listen to this earth.

So for tonight, I write in the midst storm, and I remember.

We write in the midst of the storms.

The world is crying out its silent spring. May we keep writing and resolving and co-creating anew.

[1](https://mnipl.org/2018/09/writing-for-a-storm-six-moments-of-grief-and-resistance/#_ftnref1) See: Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1962. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silent_Spring) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silent_Spring)

[2] (https://mnipl.org/2018/09/writing-for-a-storm-six-moments-of-grief-and-resistance/#_ftnref2) See: van der Kolk, Bessel. New York: Penguin, 2015.

*Note: This post originally appeared on **Minnesota Interfaith Power and Light** (<https://mnipl.org/2018/09/writing-for-a-storm-six-moments-of-grief-and-resistance/>). Written on September 14, 2018.*

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Rev. Sara Wilhelm Garbers

October 14, 2018

Acts 10

9 About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. 10 He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance. 11 He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. 12 In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air. 13 Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." 14 But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." 15 The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." 16 This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

17 Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon's house and were standing by the gate. 18 They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there. 19 While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Look, three men are searching for you. 20 Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them." 21 So Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?" 22 They answered, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say."

Opening Prayer

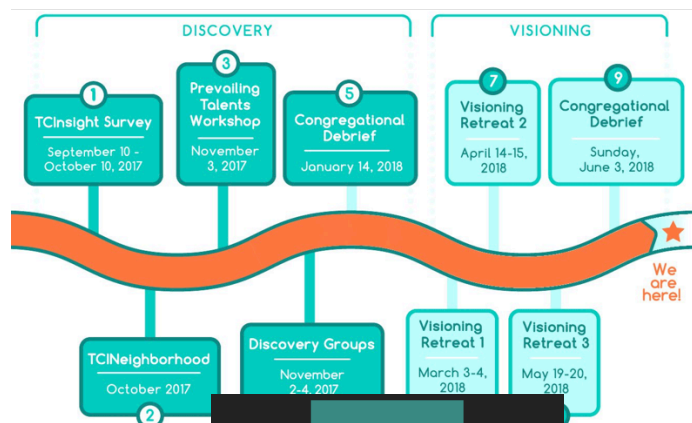
Let's pray together.

God- for life, for your love, and for all living things... we give you great thanks. Amen

Sermon Intro

Well, good morning again! It is good to see you all this morning.

As you know (and if you don't know yet then you will now know!), we have been/were in a process called "ReForming" over this past year. Through this time we have been discerning what God is calling us to next. This is some of the journey that we have been on together (see picture below).



You all started this work before I got here—in the summer of 2017. Through prayer and discernment you’ve gathered together as a community to listen. And over this past year we’ve been intentional about this process; listening to each others’ stories and the ways in which God has shown up in the past, discerning God’s invitations for the future.

the core is....
the messy

In these past weeks we’ve been delving into values that emerged from this process. Our first one **Welcome, beloved.** And our second? **Risk together path of faith!**



Well, this week we are moving into exploring our third core value, which is: **Wrestle. Wrestle with the tensions in God’s word and world.**

Sermon Body

Now, I had known about Colonial Church when I was growing up, even back to when I was in middle school. And what I knew about this place was that it was a church where people got together—I don’t know if I would have said to wrestle—but I know that’s what I thought. It was a place where you didn’t have to leave your brain or your heart at the door; where together in community you would gather and engage in debates like the “Devilish Dialogues” and I love that about this community. In fact, it’s part of why I wanted to come and be on staff here because I knew that this is a place where I could join together in community with people—some of whom I’d both agree, and some with whom I would disagree—trusting that God’s Spirit would breathe in and on us as we do life and church, wrestling together.

So it was wonderful for me as a new staff person to join during this ReForming process, knowing that your stories and experiences in this place resonated with what I thought of you. For as we listened more deeply to all of you we realized that “wrestling with the tensions” is part of who we are and have been, and are also part of what we believe God is calling us to be in the future as the church on this block, part of the larger church. And today we are going to talk a bit more about that wrestling.

I wanted to begin this sermon about wrestling by telling you about my name. My name is Sara, and in my family as we were growing up we had plaques on the walls that depicted our names, their meaning, and a Bible verse. I couldn't find mine, but here's a great example (see to the right) : Jeff. Jeffrey means peaceful.

So in my family your name definition was really important. We would call each other by the name and refer to the meaning and the verses from our plaque regularly. Some of you know that my name, Sara, is often thought to mean "God's princess."

I'll be honest with you, I hated my name.

I hated my name for two reasons: 1) Being the one in the family who gets the name that means "princess" just sounds a little like you are a prima donna. Like you are maybe, somehow, more important than the "joyful" or the "peaceful" ones. And I was profoundly uncomfortable with this insinuation. 2) Another reason I was uncomfortable with my name was because some of my Mom's struggles meant that my name and its meaning got instrumentalized as a weapon when she would turn to me and say with dripping sardonic edge: "Oh, sorry that I'm not God's princess." And it was excruciating to hear my name being used against me.

So I never really liked my name.

That is, until my first year of seminary at Bethel. I was writing an exegetical paper on Genesis 32. Some of you may know this story. It's the passage where Jacob wrestles through the night and God ends up changing his name to Israel, and we know him from then on as one who wrestles with God.

While I was reading commentaries on this passage, I realized that the Hebrew word of Israel, that means "to wrestle/struggle with" is transliterated into English as SARAH. When I read this, for the first time in my life I felt this gush of breath in my body and like God's Spirit was saying to me: "Sara, you've always had the right name."

For me this was such a gift—to think of **my** name as being part of the lineage and tradition of Israel; that I, as Sara, am a part of the people of God who wrestle with God! Here's a beautiful



So this name of Jacob “Israel” became the name of the people of God- the ones who struggle with, encounter, and are encountered by this God...the God who wrestles with them. One of the things that I love about this story is that at the end of this passage Israel names the place where he wrestled with God Peniel (which means the face of God) and from then on the Jewish people would not “eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip, because the socket of Jacob’s hip was touched near the tendon.” (See Genesis 32)

One of the things that hit me about this story from Genesis 32 and as we look forward to the passage for today from Acts 10 is that what happened in Genesis 32 and Acts 10 was never really about the food...it was about the relationship. It was about the wrestling with this God that occurred in the long history of Israel, long before Peter ever knew breath. A relationship where we wrestle through the night with God to find our truest selves, to meet God face to face, and then to become a people who struggle with God in the midst of the world.

So we come to the passage for today: Acts 10. One of the cool things about this passage is that this same scene is repeated three times in the book of Acts (See Acts 11:1-18 and 15:6-11).² Note: anytime you hear something repeated in scripture, pay attention. There is something important going on when this happens. We see something important unfolding in the story about Peter and Cornelius. Peter one of those people who are a bit intense in their embodying the things they believe. Peter is the guy who, in the garden on the night Jesus was arrested, cut off the ear of one of the soldiers, saying essentially: “I got your back, Jesus!” Then Jesus was all like: “Ok, Peter, I appreciate your loyalty and fidelity...take a breath.” And he instructs him to drop his sword.

This flourish of intense fidelity promises happens multiple times throughout Peter’s life that we have recorded in the Bible, and Acts 10 represents another one of those incidences where Peter is earnest, he is committed, and...well, he just misses some of the picture. So God shows up and invites Peter to see a bit more of the picture, extending to him an invitation to see things differently.

Many commentators label this passage from Acts 10 as being about Cornelius’ transformation. But I think that they miss the point. This passage is fundamentally about *Peter’s* transformation and his experiencing God’s invitation to experience God in a new way from how he had before. Suddenly, in his dream in Acts 10, Peter realizes and begins to discover that the promise God had made going way back into Genesis was that God’s love was for all people; and this



¹ The image of Jacob Wrestling With God is by Jack Baumgartner.

² To read more, see Eric Baretto’s piece on *Working Preacher*: Eric Barreto, “Commentary on Acts 10:1-17, 34-35,” *Working Preacher*, Accessed on October 6, 2018.

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2421.

continues in the book of Luke through Acts...a vision that the church would be for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Peter— even though it takes him a little while—catches the vision. He sees and hears from the Spirit: “Don’t call profane anything (anyone) that I have called clean.”

Sometimes I like Peter because he makes me feel good about myself. “Thank goodness I’m not like him!” 😊 Just kidding. I, and you, we are both very much like Peter. There are pieces of the vision of God’s love that are always more radical, and more loving, more inclusive of more people, and larger than we could ever imagine...or even expect. And I know that my tendency at times is to think that I have God boxed in and figured out...and everything is OK cuz I know what God wants me to think about people and things. But then God shows up again with the breath of the Spirit, tapping me, tapping us on our shoulders, inviting us to see things and each other anew.

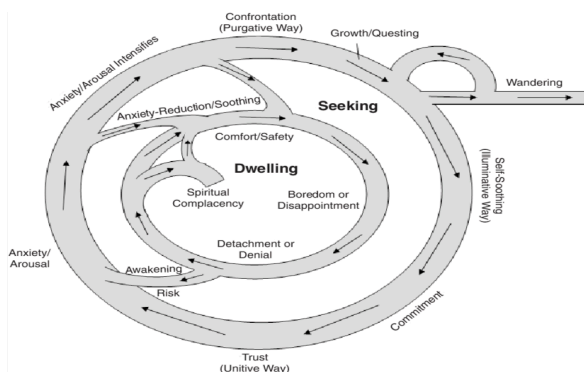
Peter is transformed. His vision is changed as he wrestles with God.

“I TRULY UNDERSTAND THAT GOD SHOWS NO PARTIALITY, BUT IN EVERY NATION ANYONE WHO FEARS GOD AND DOES WHAT IS RIGHT IS ACCEPTABLE TO GOD.”

– Peter in Acts 10:34–35

Peter’s experience is SO the human experience, right? Sometimes we engage with faith as if it is meant to give us all the answers. This keeps us feeling safe; it keeps us feeling sure. But the point of a relationship, which I think wrestling is all about, is that it invites us to risk. It invites us to show up with our whole selves—to find and discover that the things that we thought we knew so

well might be even more nuanced than we ever expected.



Steve Sandage is a professor of psychology at Boston University who taught me when I was a student at Bethel Seminary. Steve, along with some of his colleagues, has done a lot of work

on relational spirituality.³ In writing about this, they talk about how there are ways in our spiritual journey that we can seek and be “Questing” in our faith or we are “Dwelling”/rooting in. Steve, et. Al. don’t make these categories into a binary as in you have to pick that you are either going to seek and keep exploring and wrestling OR you are going to dwell and are going to stay stuck. No, they say that we need both: Some of the time we need to root in and ground ourselves deeper into our faith, and sometimes the questions rise and we are invited to wrestle.

The challenge happens when we either quit wrestling by either getting stuck or we totally leave. But the journey of relationship with God and God’s Spirit is one that invites us into a continual dance of transformation.

Let me say a bit more about this...some of you have heard me talk about Andy Garbers before (he’s married to me ☺) and one of the reasons I chose to marry Andy is because of all of the men who I knew who were single and around my age, very few of them were open to the possibility that they could ever be wrong...you know, about anything. Now I don’t think they were wrong about everything...but just that they weren’t right about everything!

So one of the things I loved (and love) about Andy is that he was a person who kept on learning and growing. I’ll never forget the moment when one of our African American friends at seminary started sharing his story (both Andy and I are white) of having some of our colleagues walking down the hallway at Bethel towards him and when they saw him they would freeze and quickly turn around to walk the other way quickly. Andy heard this. He responded: “That happens to you? That’s horrible.” Notice that he didn’t say: “Oh, common! You are overreacting! It couldn’t really have happened that way.” **No, Andy believed him.** He chose curiosity. He chose to hear people’s stories...and to believe them.

I knew that this was a person with whom I could do life because he was a person who would be able to wrestle with me no matter what would happen for he is a person who would be willing to show up for the dance of relationship with me and would be willing to be changed. And he would be able to listen to and truly hear me. But doing this- being open to being disrupted by each other is hard because to be in relationship innately involves risk. It involves the ability to show up and wrestle with one another.

There are tensions. Everything isn’t perfect in any relationship. I don’t know everything about any of you and you are going to keep on surprising me...just like God keep on surprising us. This is what it means to follow Christ.

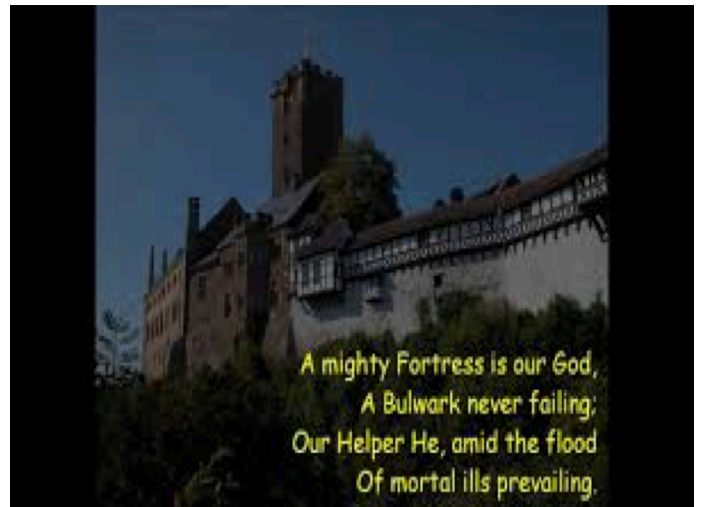
³ See especially his work with LeRon Schults. The article I referenced here is his piece with Mary Jensen and Dan Jass entitled: “Relational Spirituality and Transformation: Risking Intimacy and Alterity.” Steve Sandage, Mary Jensen, and Dan Jass, Sandage, “Relational Spirituality and Transformation: Risking Intimacy and Alterity,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, 1:2 (2008): 182–206.



All of this makes me think about Martin Luther.⁵⁷⁰ Some of you know the work of Luther (we are getting close to Reformation Sunday though it's not here yet!). I wanted to say a couple of things about him as it relates to Acts 10 and wrestling. Luther was a man who wrestled with God throughout his life in profound ways. Because of his wrestling, he ended up being a part of the transformation of the church that allows us to be

sitting here today. He nailed his 95 theses to the door in Wittenberg in 1517. He disputed and wrote prolifically and wrestled, continuing to seek to understand God. In 1520 he wrote his famous "Freedom of the Christian." In 1528 he wrote a hymn that many of you know "A Mighty Fortress is our God."

Here's the deal about Martin Luther's life: after he had posted his 95 theses his life began to be under threat. Like literally, the Pope wanted him dead and a lot of people wanted to kill him. I can't even imagine living under the threat of such acute stress and terror like he was experiencing. But by the time Martin Luther gets near the end of his life in 1543, he ends up penning a piece which has gone down in infamy because of its horror. It's entitled "On the Jews and Their Lies." This 65,000-word anti-Semitic treatise was picked up by persons who sought to expunge Jewish people from Europe multiple times throughout the 16th-20th centuries...leading to the rise of National Socialism in Germany.



If I were to wonder and guess a little bit, I would say that because of Luther's own fear of his death and how he was under attack he began to get locked in his thinking and openness to the world. He forgot that God was a refuge of safety, desiring to heal us, so that we can engage the world, but instead Luther began to lock in and get more afraid of the world, forgetting that God isn't a fortress to keep us safe from the world, but the safety that allows us to engage the world from a place of love and safety we know because of faith.

And we are called to be a people who are called to wrestle. There are tensions in the life of faith. There are tensions in the world. What does it mean to follow Christ in the midst of learning about things like Quantum Theory? I don't understand it. I don't get how it all works. And it might ask me to ask new questions about what it means to follow God, but that doesn't mean that I can't follow God *and* learn about physics, right?

We live in a world in which cultures and races and people interact in ways that we haven't in the past, but we don't need to be afraid. We can be a people who continue to wrestle. A people who

We are a people who are loved by God and God's world and God's way of loving is always more beautiful than we could have imagined. And yes, sometimes this relationship with God and each other and this world is scary. Sometimes, having things that you firmly believed be questioned and be uprooted can make you feel as if everything will implode. But as Jeff reminded us in the reading of Psalm 100: **God's love is steadfast.** It's a steadfast love that isn't intended to keep us safe so we can fight off everything and everyone. It's something that in our inner souls and beings invites us to keep breathing so that we can engage the world. It invites us to keep noticing where we get hooked and get afraid...and then reminds us to keep on praying, opening our hands and saying: "God, show up in new dreams. If there are things I'm not seeing, if there are new ways of understanding your love I say YES and AMEN."

This journey is filled with tension. This journey is filled with some grey and uncertainty, but we also know that above all of else this life is filled with God's love. It's filled with God's grace. It's filled with the presence of a God who is committed to showing up *with US*. We don't wrestle alone as we wrestle in this life. We wrestle with the God of Israel, the God of Isaac, the God of Sarah, and Naomi. The God of Jeff, and even the God of this Sara too.

God is not a fortress who keeps us safe from the world. God is the Spirit who breathes in us and invites us to be a part of God's vision for the world...To be a people who embody the handiwork of the love of God to all living things who God has named clean.

Frederick Buechner titled the story of Jacob wrestling with God "The Magnificent Defeat" and that theme is eloquently picked up in a poem by Ranier Maria Rilke that I wanted to close with. This is called "The Man Watching."⁴

I can tell by the way the trees beat, after
so many dull days, on my worried
windowpanes
that a storm is coming,
and I hear the far-off fields say things
I can't bear without a friend,
I can't love without a sister.

The storm, the shifter of shapes, drives on
across the woods and across time,
and the world looks as if it had no age:
the landscape, like a line in the psalm book,

⁴ I decided to insert this after reading Sara Koenig's piece on *Working Preacher*:
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=710

is seriousness and weight and eternity.

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What we choose to fight is so tiny!
What fights with us is so great.
If only we would let ourselves be dominated
as things do by some immense storm,
we would become strong too, and not need
names.

When we win it's with small things,
and the triumph itself makes us small.
What is extraordinary and eternal
does not want to be bent by us.
I mean the Angel who appeared
to the wrestlers of the Old Testament:
when the wrestlers' sinews
grew long like metal strings,
he felt them under his fingers
like chords of deep music.

Whoever was beaten by this Angel
(who often simply declined the fight)
went away proud and strengthened
and great from that harsh hand,
that kneaded him as if to change his shape.
Winning does not tempt that man.
This is how he grows: by being defeated,
decisively,
by constantly greater beings.

God's love is the greater thing of which Rielke writes, and we are the ones who are named ISRAEL: the people who struggle with God. And like Jacob, and Peter before us, we are called to wrestle with God, with the world, with God's word, and with one another. So let's hold on, my friends, let's keep breathing and keep expecting the Spirit to dream new dreams of who and what is clean and included in God's family, because God is not done with us, or with this world, yet.

Let us breathe and let us be a people who wrestle with the tensions in God's wonderful word and world. Amen.

*An opening invocation I gave at the "Love On" Event on November 11, 2018
"LOVE ON," dreamed into being by Kelsey Kreider Starrs and friends, was a space to
experience the healing presence of love in a variety of ways.*

*When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the life force of women; of that
creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our
language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives. – Audre Lorde, Uses of the
Erotic*

To love (eros) One's Self

To the place of loving ones' self that is birthed somewhere in the darkness of what Audre Lorde
has named the *erotic*.

The space of gestational mess that is our power.

The inner knowing.

The silences within.

The room which is one's own, as invoked Virginia Wolf.

I was taught to fear this place, to fear her, to fear her knowing.

I was taught that this place was sin, was flesh...was dangerous

And I suppose- no, I know now, that the danger is real.

The danger is that when I – when we- know this place of truth and power in our bones, in our
bodies, in our souls, there is the space where we cannot and *will not* be contained.
Here is the laughter and joy released by women dancing round together in circles.

Here is the naming of the agony of suffering and violence we have known as we rage and mourn.

Here—here is US—here we are. And this is our power: To love, to truly love and breathe in the/this truth: **we are loved; we are love itself.**

So enter into the silence.

Move tenderly toward the darkness.

And listen closely to what she will tell/tells you.

You are.

You are loved.

You are welcome.

You are seen.

You are **believed.**

You are held.

You, oh darling one, are a survivor and light-bearer.

So shine on.

And you, my sister, are power and fortitude, courage itself in the face of all that sought and seeks to destroy you.

Feel this silence,

Hold yourself in tenderness.

May this gestational earthiness

Hold and surround you

And birth you anew in power and in fierce fire of course and surety.

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To love one's self.

Come into the darkness and find that love is you/yours.

We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings. But, once recognized, those which do not enhance our future lose their power and can be altered. – Audre Lorde, Uses of the Erotic

Note: [This post](#) originally appeared as a part of [Colonial Church’s 2018 Advent Devotional Series](#). I finalized the edits for it on the night that my baby quit having a heartbeat...I got home around 10pm to discover that I, at 9.5 weeks pregnant, was bleeding and we ended up losing the baby. The profound nature of this paradoxical juxtaposition of a post entitled “Bearing New Things” while I was in the midst of miscarrying, is not lost on me.

Opening Prayer. Oh God who gives us life, may we be a people who turn towards each other and invite forth the new things that you are birthing in our lives by your Spirit. Amen.

Scripture. Luke 1: 39-45 ([see all of Luke 1 for the full story](#))

³⁹ At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah’s home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!”

Bearing New Things- From Rev. Sara Wilhelm Garbers

I love this story.

Part of the reason I love it is because we live in a world where friendship between women—friendship that is profoundly for the other in the midst of her victories and her living into the fullness of her calling before God—is often seen as being rare. And in many ways throughout history, this has been the case whenever and wherever women (or any of us, for that matter) believe that there isn’t enough love or favor to go around. This perceived scarcity then causes us to build walls between one another.

Yet I’ve been around long enough to know that it’s a lie which tells us that women can’t be *profoundly* for each other. For in truth, women have long been the source of safety and communities of care for one another...as Mary and Elizabeth themselves experienced! Like them, this has been the case in my life, for women have been some of my most important spiritual midwives, mentors, and friends.



Art by Ali Boone. Part of the Advent Perspectives that was developed by Tracy Mooty and Janet Hagberg and shared with Colonial Church during Advent 2018.

It has been through running with my girlfriends that I've often heard God's voice; their love has healed and challenged me. Through them I have come to hear my own voice and God's invitations in and to my life.

And I suppose that is part of why I love this story: it reminds us that people who were supposed to be in opposition can be for each other and refuse the lies that society tells them.

I also love this story because of what it teaches about God's way of working in the world.

This is the story of God's care for two women, of their being honored and favored by God in a society that recognized them only in terms of their identities as bearers of life.

It is the story of barriers being broken between women: a woman who was infertile and old and a young woman who was pregnant and scandalously unmarried.

It is the story of friendship and community.

It is the story of women loving each other and finding consolation and surety of God's promises by being with and for one another.

It is the story about women's bodies bearing new things, birthing life for the entire world.

Yes, **THIS** is the story of how God comes into the world.

So I imagine being Elizabeth and what it would mean to have spent a lifetime living with infertility (Which would have made her marginalized in society. [You can read Rev. Daniel's sermon](#) from Sunday for more on this), to her finding honor in her society as she is lifted up. And not only does she know the promise of her own child, but she becomes the first to bear witness and testify to the truth that the Angel had spoken to Mary:

"You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³²He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David,³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

Elizabeth is the first to know and proclaim the true identity of Mary's baby as her own baby leaps within her. And upon Elizabeth's proclamation, Mary knows that she will not be alone, she will not be cast outside of the community...*for she is believed.*



Macha Chmakoff, Visitation à la lumière

Through these women a revolution is given life...a new *kindom*^[1] of human relationship with God and one another has arrived. Through them, God is bearing new things and giving life. Through them we have a new baptism and the realized promise of *Emmanuel—God with us*. And Elizabeth and Mary...well, they stay together for three months, caring for each other and knowing the beauty and power of what happens when women believe God *and* one another and are committed to the labor of love that is our invitation to bring *God with us* into the world ..the God who is bearing new things in and through us as we indeed labor with and for one another towards the rebirth and redemption of our world.

[1]From the work of Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz.

Questions for Consideration.

- Have you ever considered the power of the relationship between Mary and Elizabeth before? Take some time to reflect upon the story and what each may have been feeling in the midst of their pregnancies.
- Where is there a relational divide God might be inviting you to cross?
- How might you cultivate the ability to be with and for others?
- Where might God be inviting you to bear new things? What is the labor God might be calling you to this Advent?

Closing Prayer. God, make us a people who with out lives, believe one another and extend your welcome and friendship to and with one another. Birth in us the newness of life. Breathe on us, oh Emmanuel- God with and for us. Amen.

The Third Lesson: Luke 2:25-35
Rev. Sara Wilhelm Garbers

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I wrote this while listening to [“Alleluia” from Giulio Caccini as performed by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir](#). William Hughes fashioned an arrangement of the piece especially for Lessons and Carols at Colonial, which immediately followed my lesson. I’d encourage you to listen to the song as you read my lesson.

Luke 2:25-35 (NRSV)

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. 27 Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

29 “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
30 for my eyes have seen your salvation,
31 which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”

33 And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed 35 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Lesson

What does it mean to wait for consolation from suffering inside of a history that spans generations? Advent hope and longing for the promise yet to be realized, while still we wait and hope through the night, clinging to the promise in our hearts, the flicker of a love that reminds us—no matter the terror, no matter the pain, no matter the revolution appearing impossible, in the end of all things love will rise again, love will heal, love will restore.

Yet we long for that which is not yet ours as Israel waited and longed through the long winter’s nights of oppression and occupation: “Where, oh God, where is your light?” And as is true of history, the political intersects with real of our lives...where a mother is told that her son will cause the rising and fall of many, and that he will be opposed.

Her heart is pierced, and so is ours.

Not only in the longing and the waiting for fulfillment of the promise, but in the risk of loving, our hearts are pierced, yet still we come, hands open, desperate for the freedom and coming of this salvation. Praying: 581

Prayer

Oh God, hold us through the night. Gird our hearts that we might wait through the longest of nights. We come with all that we are, and all that we have, with our hands open to love. We fall and kiss the ground as we find our hands empty and our hearts desperate with longing to know the breaking dawn of your kingdom come.

For those in need of this great light, for those fleeing home in search for freedom and justice in new lands, for those of us who cry out as we await your salvation...we pray that our children may likewise revel the thoughts of many as your kingdom breaks forth in the dawning of the morn...

Our hearts are pierced, yet still for this consolation we long:

Come. Come. Come oh Emmanuel, come. Save and rescues us.

Shalom. Shalom. Shalom.

Emmanuel, come. Alleluia.

Amen.



Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:2-7

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who lived in the land of deep darkness, on them a light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy. They rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest. As people exult when dividing plunder for the yoke of their burden and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the trampling warriors, and all the garments rolled in blood, shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us. A son given for us. Authority rests upon his shoulders, and he is named wonderful Counselor, mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be an endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forever more. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

-Isaiah 9:2-7 (NRSV)

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Will you pray with me?

Light of life, you came in flesh,
born into human pain and joy,
and gave us the power to be your children.
Grant us faith, oh Christ, to see your presence among us,
so that all of creation may sing new songs of gladness
and walk in the way of peace. Amen.¹

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Now, for some of you, you hear the words "For unto us, a child is born," and you go right to Handel's "Messiah," right?

Well, for those of us who experienced Christmas in 1992, you may hear those lyrics and go right to Amy Grant's 1992 rendition of the song for her Christmas album. Here I thought that she invented the song...turns out she didn't. But I will never forget being a kid, walking into Target at Southdale that year and hearing that song on the

¹ From the *Vanderbilt Common Lectionary*,
<https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/prayers.php?id=99>.



overhead (she was in partnership that year with Target and so there were all these pictures of Amy Grant everywhere, which for me, as a huge fan of Amy Grant, was basically the most amazing thing: Jesus, Target, and Amy Grant. It was great!).² Now what you don't know, in addition to what I just told you, is that as a kid, I would dance around the kitchen to this song and pretend that I was like Katrina Witt 1988 Olympics and... that I was going to land a double axle and win the gold medal in the singles competition. Well, it didn't happen for me.

So on this Christmas Eve, whichever song you hear in your head when you hear those words, "For onto us a Child is born," whether it is some beautiful choral rendition of Handel's Messiah, or whether it is nothing, we are all here tonight to celebrate the child who has been born and given to us; the one who comes in the midst of our longings, our joys, our hopes, our dreams, and our sorrows.

And tonight as we come to celebrate and welcome the Christ-child, I wanted to give you a little bit more context about this passage from Isaiah. The story and background of this text goes back to 734 to 732 BCE. At the time the land and people of Israel were experiencing an imminent attack from the north.

The ruler at the time was trying to figure out how they might stay safe and began to look at who he might ally with for his troops. And what happens in the midst of this, is the prophet Isaiah comes and says, "No, stop it. You're looking for something to rescue you; seeking to put your trust in humans. But the call is to be the people of God, to put your trust in God, not in the political powers or structures of your day." And here in the midst of this, the kingdom is reminded that God will continue to be faithful to them.

In this passage, we see the contrast of darkness and light, of anguish and hope, of people who are longing in the midst of the night. In the midst of oppression, of war, there comes assurance. Assurance of liberation from the evil Assyrian Empire of the day. Not maybe the most Christmasy message, Daniel, still, I give him thanks for letting me preach about it. Because here's the thing about this passage, which one of my favorite scholars reminds us: This is actually an incredibly Christmasy message, because we know the realities of the world around us: realities of war and violence, of poverty, of sexism, and injustice. And we, in each of our own ways, long for redemption.

The word of Isaiah comes to us on this eve and reminds us, that we're not to ally ourselves with powers that will make us feel like we will be buffeted, with identities that will prop us up. No, instead, the call to be the people of God is the same call it has been throughout all of human history: At the center of our world and of our identities, is to be following hard after this God, a God who from the beginning of time has fashioned all of humanity in God's image.

² Amy Grant, "Joy to the World/For Unto Us a Child is Born," *Home for Christmas* (Nashville: A&M, 1992).



This is the God who on this night, we remember as Emmanuel, God-with-us. This is the God who shows up in the real of human history and reminds us that hope isn't something for a far off kingdom or time, no, hope is the promise and the whisper of God's Spirit throughout not only all of time, but the promise and whisper that we come to hear this very night in the real of our lives. This is the God upon whose shoulders all things rest. This is the Prince of Peace, the mighty God, the wonderful Counselor. This is the God who will show up. This is the God who shows up. Not in the way of mighty forces that we might expect, but in the form of an infant born through a woman, comes the redemption of people that they had longed for throughout the years. "For unto us a child is born."

And on this Christmas Eve, we light candles, because this light continues to shine in darkness, no matter what the darkness of our history or our current lives know so well. This is Emmanuel, the God who is with us, the child to whom is born to us. This is the God who is for us.

This God who is for us is Emmanuel, who shows up not only in the real of human history and of our political realities, but as has always been true, this is the God who shows up in the real of our lives. This is the God who three weeks ago, as my wonderful spouse rubbed my belly as we wept together because of our miscarriage, is the God who is Emmanuel, who is with all of us this night. Emmanuel, "For unto us, a child is born." The hope for which we long, the grief that we bring and carry with us, and lay at the feet of the God who knows what it means to be born of human flesh and blood, of our hopes and our dreams and our longings, of the things that we do not yet know will be, but we hope through the night.

So on this night, I don't know what you bring into this space. I don't know what political realities, or family situations, or jobs, or anything that you may be carrying, but I do know this: this is a God who throughout all of human history has shown up as love.

The God who is with us.

The God who is for us, the everlasting one, inside of history, meeting us in the real of our lives.

Not the one who comes to wage war, but the one who brings peace, peace to our nation, peace to our world, peace to our homes and our bodies and our hearts and this earth. So on this night, as we sing, "Come oh, come, Emmanuel." And as we, together with church throughout all of human history, affirm, "For unto us, a child has been born." I pray that this peace might be yours. For Emmanuel is, Emanuel was, and Emmanuel will be.

So let us fall on our knees and receive this good news: "For unto us a child is born." God is for us, God is for you. May this babe who is born this night meet you in the real of your life. Don't rely on the powers or look to them to save you, but on this night might you look for the child who comes in the manger to save us, and might



we rely on the love of Christ on whom all rests.

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Will you pray with me?

God of glory,

your splendor shines from a manger in Bethlehem,

where the light of the world is humbly born

into the darkness of human night.

God, that you would open our eyes to Christ's presence, to the Emmanuel, the God with us in the shadows of our world,

so that we, like Christ, may become the beacons of your peace and your justice and your reign and your way of doing things.

May we be defenders of all for whom there is no room, as you, indeed, make room for us. In the name of Emmanuel, the child to whom is born to us. Amen.³

³ From the Vanderbilt Common Lectionary. See:
<https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/prayers.php?id=99>.

February 4, 2019

Rev Sara Wilhelm Garbers

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Resurrection of Christ

15 Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, **2** through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

3 For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, **4** and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, **5** and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. **6** Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. **7** Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. **8** Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. **9** For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. **10** But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. **11** Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

Opening Prayer

Oh God of all goodness and life, on this snowy morning, in this room, in this space—gathered together and here in our own hearts—we invite you, by your Spirit, to continually unearth inside of us new soil and new land. Soil that springs forth with abundance the goodness of your love and life in this world.

May this indeed be the good news in which we stand.

AMEN.

A couple of times this week I was talking with folks about how if you’ve been around for any length of time (which for me is about a year) you know that each one of the ministers on staff have a very similar sermon that we preach...irrespective of the passage. It’s true! Well, it’s true of all of our lives, actually.

So for me, the sermon is always something like: “God loves you. God loves everybody. Let’s saturate in that love! Breathe in and go forth and like love your neighbors and (peace sign) everything’s going to be ok!”

Jeff’s sermons (I’m gonna be in trouble because he’s sitting right here!)...well, Jeff is like “Let’s love Jesus! You are **so** loved! I’m going to tell you an engaging story to help you remember this and apply it to your life and be a different kind of person. Let’s be the church together!”

(Something like that...)

Carter, well Carter is always going to challenge us to think anew and prophetically about the way that a passage opens us up: “What’s something we hadn’t seen before? What’s a way we want to engage with this?” And he’s going to laser in on a piece of challenge for/to us.

Daniel is going to keep pressing us to take seriously the invitation of the gospel to change who we are; that we are indeed a people who are in need of transformation. “We should be suspect when we think we’ve already arrived because remember, we need the cross (making the sign of the cross on your forehead as Daniel has encouraged us).”

Does that seem kind of fair so far?

Well, that’s all I have for you (since you already know what I’m going to preach)! Ok, I’m just kidding.

But I bring this up just to say that here in the book of I Corinthians we have this story of what’s going on inside of a community where you have people who are like:

“I follow Jeff.”

“I follow Sara!”

“I follow Marie!” (which might be the best option)

And he’s coming to them to say: “Hey Corinth, we all follow Christ. That’s the important thing here.” And in this season and time which we call

Epiphany, the time of the light, what a better time than this for us to be reminded through I Corinthians 15 to recall: *What is the good news in which we stand?* 588

What does it mean that each of us, who preach our own life's sermons about what it means to follow God, that we each contemplate and consider: What is it that our lives are telling about who God is? What is the good news of the sermon we preach as we live our lives? And I also hope that today, with some tender compassion towards ourselves, we might invite God's Spirit to continue to breathe into the places within us and ways in which each of our lives miss out on a bit of the fullness of the gospel of grace.

So, to I Corinthians 15 and *the good news in which we stand*.

There's something about me that you may have noticed, particularly if you're in Women's Monday Night Bible Study...it's that I *really* like context. So you can't ask me to preach on I Corinthians 15 and expect me to only take eleven verses of the Bible (don't worry, we won't be here forever!).

The thing is, I LOVE this book of I Corinthians because it's written to real people. There's a church in Corinth who are struggling with incredibly human things around human divisions along the lines of class and race and ethnicity and gender, as Kyle talked about so wonderfully in his sermon from a few weeks ago. They are striving to figure out what it means to be the body of Christ. "Can we eat meat that was sacrificed to idols, they query? Or can we not?"

Now, of course, those aren't our questions today. But we have our own questions. We have our own conflicts and wonders about what it means to be church in the midst of a world that is divided (as humans have always been). And we wonder (maybe sometimes, anyway)...does the Gospel have anything to say to this present moment? If Paul (the author of this letter to the church at Corinth) were here this morning, he would argue that it does have something to offer to us. And so, in chorus with Paul, I would also like to argue that this book speaks to the real of our lives and our questions.

This early church that Paul is writing to in Corinth is largely filled with Gentiles, people who haven't had the same sort of history and background of connection to the story of God that the people of Israel had in their particular way. So as we approach chapter 15, Paul is re-grounding this new Christian community, not only in the gospel that he had preached to them, but in a remembrance of why there is legitimacy

both in his preaching to them and to what he is inviting and challenging 589 them to do with their lives.

He builds the case for himself by beginning with the content of their faith, reminding them of the gospel's original terms, trying to bring them back into what was proclaimed and brought to them in the first place. This is also outlined here and also in the book of Acts (following C. Clifton Black):

- A reminder of the gospel's original terms (1 Corinthians 15:1, Acts 10:36)
- The necessity of preaching (1 Corinthians 15:1, Acts 10:42)
- The faith in which the church stands (1 Corinthians 15:2, Acts 10:43)
- Handing down the tradition and story of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:3, Acts 10:37-39a)
- Christ's death (1 Corinthians 15:3, Acts 10:39b)
- The forgiveness of sins (1 Corinthians 15:3, Acts 10:43)
- The connection to the scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3-4, Acts 10:43)
- Christ's resurrection on the third day
- Christ's appearance to Cephas, the Twelve, and many others (1 Corinthians 15:5-8, Acts 10:41)¹

And he then connects all of this to his legitimacy as the apostle who has brought the gospel to them. So in a way, what he is doing is a two-fold move: 1) He's reminding them of the content of the gospel which he's been proclaiming to them and to which they have given their lives; and 2) He's also reminding them of the lineage of the authority by which he comes. He's not just some random dude who showed up: "Hey, I'm Paul! Listen to me!" He's saying: "No, I have connection to God's story and I have legitimacy to come before you to tell you what I've been telling you this whole letter! So if you haven't been paying attention for the last 14 chapters...Ok! Common, folks...remember here's what I'm doing here."

A really powerful moment, which some of you will know why this particularly struck me given my miscarriage in December, is verse nine in which he says: "For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an

¹ C. Clifton Black, "1 Corinthians 15:1-11," *Working Preacher Commentary*, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=288.

apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” The Greek there is *to 590* *ektromati*. This word is connected with the word miscarriage or stillbirth. He’s saying something here about resurrection...that God appeared to him as one who was actually dead at birth and brought him to new life. He’s acknowledging this truth that Jesus talks about in the book of John: that we have to be born again.² Indeed Paul, a person who had been totally going after the church in order to destroy it, is now one who has found his way into new life; he’s one who has known the resurrection story in his own life.³

And this is the story is the one that Paul brings to the church in Corinth, challenging them that to be Christian is fundamentally about being born again into a new way of being human. It’s a new way of ordering our politics, our society, and our relationships.

Now this letter to the church in Corinth was actually written before the gospels. Those stories of Jesus work and life were oral traditions that only later were written down and collected. The Gospels in Greek are all titled “*Kata Matthaíos (Matthaíos)*”, “*Kata Márkos (Márkos)*”, “*Kata Loukás (Loukás)*”...This means “the Gospel according to.”

I Corinthians then is an early instance of “the Gospel according to...”, especially here in I Corinthians 15. But the gospel “*Kata Paulos*”, the gospel according to Paul, is always the gospel according to the scriptures; the gospel “*Kata tas graphas*” (*the texts*). We see this sense of the centrality of the texts to the gospel throughout a lot of Paul’s writing, particularly here in this letter.⁴

² See John 3 and Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus.

³ I’m indebted here to Carla Works’ commentary on this section where she writes: “The word that Paul uses to describe himself is a premature birth -- a birth that usually results in death. It is the epitome of weakness. In a world where only fifty percent of full-term births reached the age of ten, the premature baby had little to no chance of survival. This is the same term used to describe a stillbirth. Christ’s narrative is not the only resurrection story in this passage,” Carla Works, “I Corinthians 15:1-11,” *Working Preacher*, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3959.

⁴ Karl Jacobson does a wonderful job of outlining this in his commentary. He writes, “Variations on this particular phrase occur in several places in the New Testament-- several times in Paul’s letters, and a couple of times in Acts. Acts portrays Paul’s missionary work in Thessalonica, his proclamation and his evangelical persuading, as “from the scriptures” (apo tōn graphōn; Acts 17:1-4). Paul introduces himself to the Romans as “an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures” (en graphais hagiáis; Romans 1:1-3). And in 2 Corinthians 4:13 Paul speaks of faith and the resurrection of the dead as “in accordance with the scriptures” (kata to gegrammenon). In all of these instances, by stating that his gospel is “in accordance with the scriptures,” Paul makes a claim on the authority, centrality, and (again) the “first importance” of what is being proclaimed.”

This, for Paul, is where he is rooting the authority by which he comes...in 591 the scriptures and the texts and traditions handed down. In so doing, he's making a connection between his work and the long story and arc of God and God's movement in the world through the people of Israel. He's reminding the people in Corinth: THIS is the good news. And they are called to live in accordance with this good news.

Now some of you, upon hearing the reading of I Corinthians 15, may have been reminded of some of the language of the Apostle's Creed. If so, that makes sense! The language here in I Corinthians 15 echoes some early formulations of what would later be a language for the whole church. I thought we could read that aloud together. Will you join me?

The Apostle's Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

Karl Jacobson, "I Corinthians 15:1-11," *Working Preacher*,
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=524.

So we see here in I Corinthians 15 gestational evidence of this where Paul, having begun to talk to the Corinthians at the beginning of the letter, is bringing them deeper and deeper into what it means to be a part of this body. What does it mean to follow Christ? He's reminding them of the place on which they are grounded; the place in which they are rooted.

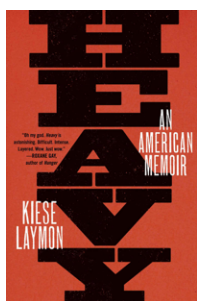
Recently, in this same letter, as you may remember from Daniel's sermon on chapter 13, Paul is reminding the Corinthians of who God is calling them to be. Paul does so by grounding all they are and are called to be fundamentally in love, inviting us through them into a space of re-remembering the place in which we are rooted. This place is **love**.

Thinking of this recalled to my mind that last year I was invited by one of my friends, Colonial member, and mentor Janet Hagberg, to consider what my word for the year might be. My word for last year was ROOTED. The image that came to me with me with this word was from Psalm 1...of the tree that is rooted by the streams of water. For me, last year indeed was a year of upending my own soil...the place where my roots need to find water and remember where they find life. There are some rocks in the soil of my life that have prevented me from going as deeply as God would want me to. And some of last year was painful, which is normal, right? As we're rooting in, some of that work is excruciating; sometimes we want to run away from that work. We think: "Oh- it would be so much easier if I didn't have to do this!" And yet I think I Corinthians shows up as a reminder and a challenge to us that to root in is what is asked of us if we are Christian. We hear Paul calling to us: *What is the good news that you have received, on which you stand?*

Yes, what is it? Is it the gospel according to (fill in the blank)...OR is it the gospel according to Christ?

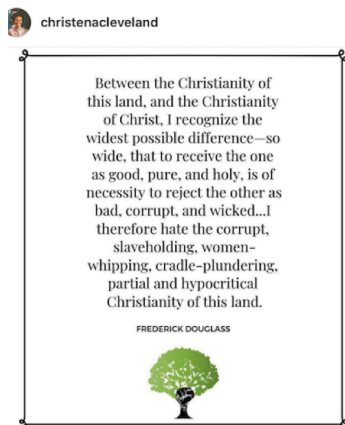
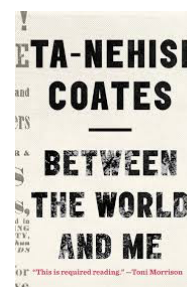
And what is the content of the gospel of Christ?

I've been thinking a lot about this passage and have ben wondering: If Paul were writing to us today, what might he say to us? What might his questions bring in terms of challenges and invitations to us?



I was sitting with this wondering yesterday as Andy and I drove down to Wisconsin for a funeral for his great uncle. On the way there we listened to an audio book called *Heavy: An American Memoir*. The author, Kiese Laymon, is an African American man who relays his experience of growing up as a black boy in the United States, talking about the pain and injustice he's suffered and endured. This book, in turn, got me thinking about another text by

Ta-Nehisi Coates *Between the World and Me*. And this got me thinking about I Corinthians and this church that is wrestling with its diversity. Some are eating meat, some are not. And they are trying to figure out how to become a church of diverse people. In our time, if Paul were writing to us, I wonder if he would challenge and invite us to ask what the good news says to us about issues of race and injustice in our world?

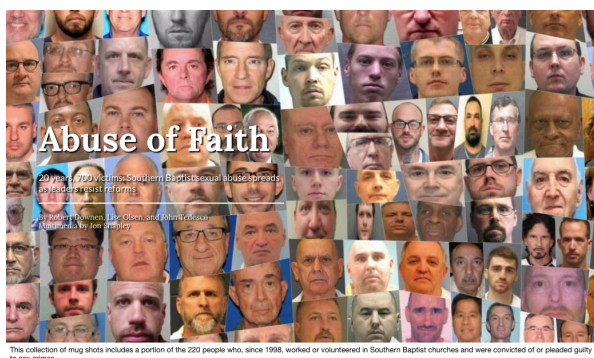


Then a quote from Fredrick Douglass showed up on my Instagram this morning, posted by Christena Cleveland who is the author of the book that we are reading together during Black History Month: *Disuintiy in Christ*. The quote reads: “Between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, t hat to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked...I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land.”

Ugh, right? I almost cried.

This quote stands as a challenge in the vein of what Paul is doing here in inviting the church to be rooted in the good news in which they stand.

In the past months we’ve often talked about how the church in the US is in decline. I want to bring I Corinthians into that conversation and say: “Let’s listen to Paul! Let’s be the church then!”



Because when things like this (see left) get published by the *Houston Chronicle*, where they are exposing how over 20 years more than 700 victims were sexually molested or abused by more than 200 leaders in the Southern Baptist Church, with very little recourse, *these are reasons why people leave!*⁵ These are reasons where the gospel that we’ve proclaimed that “God is love!” this supposed good news in which we

⁵ See: Robert Downen, Lise Olsen, and John Tedesco, “Abuse of Faith,” *Houston Chronicle*, Published February 9, 2019, <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/investigations/article/Southern-Baptist-sexual-abuse-spreads-as-leaders-13588038.php>

stand, suddenly isn't good news...even for us. So Paul encounters us in this space of profound failure of our lives to preach good news and exclaims to us: "Remember the GOOD NEWS! Let's be people of Good News!"

And even though sometimes its scary and hard and we mess up being the church; even though we get it wrong all of the time, Paul brings us back. In I Corinthians 13 what does he say? Faith, hope, and love...and the greatest of these is **love**. Paul reminds us of who Jesus is and what Jesus did and he calls us back again to be people of the GOOD NEWS, remembering the ground on which we stand.

So for me, when I hear stories like the one about the abuse in the Southern Baptist Church, not only do I want to weep, but I want to be a better Christian. I want to be a person who embodies the Good News, *actual* good news in our world.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German theologian and pastor during the Nazi reign in Germany, wrote letters from prison during the final days of his life.⁶ He lived in a world that he said had "come of age." At this time there were also folks, and I get this tendency to want to blame the world or grieve the decline in church attendance as we are witnessing today, who were bemoaning the end of Christendom. To the church of his day he wrote:

I consider the attack by Christian apologetics on the world's coming of age as, first of all, pointless, second, ignoble, and third, unchristian.⁷

He continues, talking about the way we embody Christianity as a refusal to face the real of our lives (which he sees as a problem and failure of us to apprehend the gospel):

Redemption myths arise from the human experience of boundaries. But Christ takes hold of human beings in the midst of their lives.⁸

And finally, he says this:

What I am driving at is that God should not be smuggled in somewhere, in the very last, secret place that is left. Instead, one must simply recognize that the world and humankind have come

⁶ He was killed by the Nazis in prison days before the camp was liberated by the Allies.

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010, 427.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 448.

of age. One must not find fault with people in their worldliness but 595 rather confront them with God where they are strongest.⁹

THIS is the good news in which we stand. The invitation of Paul is issued to us, today. How are we going to be a people of the good news? What is the story of our lives that we tell? What is the sermon that our lives preach?

Is it resonate with the image that Paul gives here in Corinthians—of this God who came down, became human, who became one of us to erase the divisions between humans: To preach good news, and resurrection and life and freedom and hope in Christ. To break down walls. To remind us that our body politic is no longer about the emperor as head, but of Christ as head.¹⁰ He remind us each that every part of the body is of equal merit and equal worth.

So this morning, as we come to I Corinthians 15, I wonder: what's the sermon that you preach? What's the sermon your life preaches?

What is the good news?

What is good news?

What is the good news in which you stand?

And I wonder here for us, as Colonial Church, part of *this* body of Christ...what is the good news in which *we* stand—Edina and St. Louis Park-eites, white/brown, rich/poor/middle class, 85 or 12—what is it that as *this body* we are preaching with our lives?

Let us be a people of GOOD NEWS in this world.

Let us be the CHURCH.

Let us heal the broken, free the prisoners, preach sight for those who can't see.

And as we preach our sermons by the life we lead, may we always remember the good news on which we stand. Recalling that greatest of these, my friends, is always **LOVE**.

and now these
three remain:
faith, hope & love.
But the greatest
of these is love.
1 CORINTHIANS 13:13

So may that love of Christ be yours and ours. AMEN.

⁹ Ibid., 457.

¹⁰ See Kyle Robert's Sermon on I Corinthians 12:12-31, "God's Body." See: <https://www.colonialchurch.org/sermonaudio/gods-body>.

February 11, 2019**Rev. Sara Wilhelm Garbers**1 Corinthians 15:12-20 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

12 Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; 14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. 15 We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. 17 If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have died (fallen asleep) in Christ have perished. 19 If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

20 But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died (fallen asleep).

Prayer

Will you pray with me? God, who is the resurrection and the life: not the great *I was* nor the great *I will be*, but the great *I am*. As the Puritans have prayed, give us indeed “a mountaintop and high as the valley is low.”¹ AMEN.

Sermon: “Rise Up”

(If you are a little human and you want to go to FaithTrek and you haven't left yet, this is your shot. And if you're a big human and want to leave, this is also your shot!)

Well, good morning. My name Sara and I'm one of the ministers here at Colonial Church. This week we received news that Dawn, beloved spouse of our Senior Minister Daniel, is living with stage four pancreatic cancer. This was one of those moments that many of us have encountered in different ways in our own lives, where suddenly grief or pain opens up in ways that we hadn't experienced before...and we are undone.

In the middle of this fundamental re-orientation of the Harrell family life it would be the case, of course, that the lectionary text² which Daniel had pre-

¹ Daniel referenced this prayer in the journal on Dawn's Caring Bridge site. February 16, 2019. See: <https://www.caringbridge.org/visit/dawnharrell/journal>

² The Revised Common Lectionary is a three-year cycle of weekly readings utilized by many Protestant churches that follows the church calendar and includes a weekly reading from the

assigned for the sermon today (well, to be clear—not that he assigned it for 597 the whole church world-wide!) is I Corinthians 15:12-20, the passage that was just read to you...on the resurrection from the dead.

Upon receiving Dawn's news I, having preached the first part of I Corinthians 15 last week, told Daniel that I could preach today if he wanted me to. But upon recalling the content of this passage I thought: "Why did I say volunteer to preach on resurrection on this of all weeks?" I wrestled with and feared that my words would fail me and wished the text was something different. But then I thought: "Well, of course I'm going to preach on this passage today because this is what I actually believe..." You see, not only do I believe in resurrection, but I also think that faith matters most in the moments that feel the most impossible or challenging or rife with pain...where we fear our undoing...for those are **precisely** the places where the invitation of God is not to run away or to look away our faces, but to journey deeper into love and life and even indeed the darkness and uncertainty, for these are the paces of true gospel healing. For in truth, we all know and affirm a faith that affirms that resurrection can only come from death.

So this morning we come to I Corinthians 15:12-20. I wanted to start my sermon then by talking a bit about the text, then I will move to another layer of reflection upon some of the threads of which Paul writes, and then I will end the sermon with some invitations I think this text issues to us. Let's jump in.

The text for today follows on the heels of 15 verse 11.³ This passage then is the content of what Paul said he has come to proclaim to the Corinthians: that Christ has been raised from the dead. For Paul, without the resurrection from the dead and if Christ had not been raised, then his proclamation is in vain, and so is their faith.

To be honest, whenever I read this passage while I was growing up I wondered: "Why are we supposed to be pitied the most of anyone if Christ has not been raised? Why would our faith be in vain then?" I mean, I get that I'm supposed to believe in Christ's resurrection, but what does he mean here?

Well, Paul gives us some insight into what he means. He says that their faith is in vain if Christ has not been raised because then they are misrepresenting God (which I don't know about you, but misrepresenting God is something that I tend to try to avoid). He also argues that they have testified that God raised Christ from the dead but if resurrection is impossible then Christ was not

Hebrew Bible, a Psalm, a reading from the Gospels, and a reading from the rest of the New Testament. You can read more about the lectionary online at:
<https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/faq2.php>

³ 15:11 reads: "Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe." (NRSV)

raised...so what are they even talking about and bothering to proclaim or live 598
this faith? And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is futile because
you are still in your sins. And all who have died, in Paul's language here what
we translate as *died* actually should read *gone to sleep*, have perished.

So why are they the most to be pitied if Christ has not been raised? And why
would we be pitied if this resurrection is not our hope? Well, when you stop to
think about the life of Paul and the reality of the early church—why would
anyone choose this faith? Why would anyone decide to affirm resurrection in
the midst of a reality that their lives were under threat because of their beliefs
(which was very much the case!)? This wasn't just some nice bubblegum that
made them feel better, it was something that asked and, indeed, demanded
the whole of their lives. And to Paul's point—*What are you doing if this is all
meaningless?!*

Paul is challenging the Corinthians to think carefully about resurrection and the
meaning of faith in Christ. He builds his case throughout the chapter of the
centrality of resurrection, arguing that Christ has been raised and is the first
fruits of resurrection's promise.⁴ Later on in chapter 15 (beyond what we read
for today) he will talk about how death came through Adam, but now through
Christ life comes to everyone. Christ then is the first fruits of the coming of the
kingdom of God—that one day indeed, Christ will have every ruling power and
authority under his reign. But if Christ has not been raised, then why are we
doing baptisms for the dead, he asks? Why are we putting ourselves at risk? If
this life and death is all there is, and there is no resurrection, then—as he'll pen
later in chapter 15, let's just eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we will all
die.⁵

But, believing in resurrection as he does, he discusses the resurrection body
near the end of this chapter. He argues that the body which is raised is not like
imperishable but is a spiritual body.⁶ He invites the Corinthians to apprehend

⁴ V.20 But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.
(which will then be followed by how death came through one and now resurrection through
one; all die through Adam all alive in Christ).

⁵ Questions from (v.29-30): Why baptism for the dead if they do not raise? Why put ourselves
in danger every hour? If it was merely for human animals then why would we have fought?
“Eat Drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.”

⁶ V. 42-44: “42 So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is
raised is imperishable. 43 It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it
is raised in power. 44 It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical
body, there is also a spiritual body.” And V 50-54- “50 What I am saying, brothers and sisters,
is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the
imperishable. 51 Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed,
52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and
the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. 53 For this perishable body must
put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. 54 When this perishable

more fully that the coming of God's kingdom swallows up death in its victory, for the sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law, but thanks be to God for God gives us victory in Christ Jesus.⁷ All of this talk of resurrection comes right before the final chapter of this letter to the Corinthian church as he ends by reminding them to keep alert, to stand firm, to be courageous and strong, and to let all that they do be done in love.⁸

So let me say a little bit more of this Pauline discussion of resurrection (a lot of this section will be in conversation and coming from the commentary that Carla Works shared on *Working Preacher*).⁹ Dr. Works writes that throughout the book of Corinthians it is made clear is that for Paul, resurrection—*bodily resurrection*—is not optional. For if there is no resurrection then there is no hope. For Paul, without bodily resurrection, there isn't any good news. And resurrection of which Paul talks about here in chapter fifteen, is one in which actual physical bodies rise. This is made clear as he employs a word that best translates as *corpse* to refer to our bodies.¹⁰ For him, it matters that God cares for our **actual physical bodies**. Christian faith then isn't some dis-embodied spirituality, disconnected from the real of our lives. No, it is one that is located precisely in our bodies, our actual flesh, where the bodily resurrection of Christ animates our hope and new life.

This focus on the corporal is noteworthy particularly because at the time that Paul was writing the dominant philosophical and spiritual traditions privileged the spirit over against the body. For them it was as if the body was secondary or didn't matter—it was corrupt. Indeed, leaving of the body made one truly spiritual.¹¹ Inside of Jewish thought though there had long been strands of belief that affirmed the resurrection of the body, including the one that Paul was formed in as a Pharisee. Pharisees believed in, and had long hoped for

body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

⁷ V.56-57: "56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

⁸ 16:13-14: "Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love."

⁹ Carla Works, *Working Preacher*,

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3966

¹⁰ The word he uses here is *nekros*; corpse.

¹¹ Carla Works argues: "There are many reasons why a first century audience might not find belief in a bodily resurrection appealing. Even in Greek culture, that celebrated the body in its art, there were still strands of philosophical thought that vilified the body and cautioned against giving into its desires. The body, after all, was corrupt, physical matter. According to Plutarch, death was simply the release of the soul from the body. Marcus Aurelius taught that at death the body goes to the earth and the soul to the atmosphere. The separation of the soul from the fleshly matter of the body was a widespread belief. If the soul, which was considered pure and heavenly or celestial in substance, longed to escape the corrupt body, why would this God raise corpses? This must have seemed counterintuitive to Corinthians who had thought of themselves as educated, sophisticated, and wise. Why couldn't they place their hope in their souls going to be with the Lord."

resurrection. Even more so, Paul's entire life pivoted on the moment he encountered the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus. For him then, as we see here in his letter to the church in Corinth, he will not budge from the belief that resurrection is the central point of the Christian faith; the power of Christ's resurrection has the power to actually destroy death AND the death-dealing powers in our world...that the ultimate spiritual, physical, and political victory would be God's, as is made clear in Christ's bodily resurrection.

This is why Paul doesn't actually say in this text that people are dead but instead writes that they have *gone to sleep*, because for him death isn't the ultimate reality. No, he believes that fundamentally, at the end of all things, God's power and God's reign will work and operate such that death indeed will be defeated, and sin will as well. In this reality, those who have gone to sleep will rise into the ultimate reality as resurrected beings, living freely and fully under the rein of God's kingdom. And that is good news to Paul, indeed.

The centrality of the embodied and the real of our lives, and God's intimate concern for them, is pervasive throughout Paul's letter to the Corinthians. In a similar vein, one of my favorite theologians, Ignacio Ellacuría, wrote about the gospel as that which invites us to deal with *la realidad*, the real.¹² For him, the call of the Christian is to actually encounter the world in the midst of the real of our lives. And the real of our lives know pain, know suffering, know longing, know death...and it is this spot precisely, Ignacio Ellacuría reminds us, where the Gospel of life and resurrection breathes. For him, we are fundamentally at all times held and sustained by a God of resurrection life, and when *la realidad* feels like it might kill and destroy us, this is actually the moment and the place where the promise of life—the good news—shows up. That is not to say that faith ignores the fact that our lives are riven with pain and cancer and all sorts of other trouble, but it's an affirmation that these things don't get to have the final word. For the fundamental *realidad*, is the kingdom and love of God.

This reality then is opened up and made ours through the resurrection of Christ which animates our ability to embody resurrection life in the midst of a world where death appears to have victory and power. This notion was made real to me when I had the opportunity to travel to El Salvador a number of years ago. While I was there I heard the story of a man named Oscar Romero. Oscar Romero was the Bishop of El Salvador during the gestational days of the Salvadoran Civil War.¹³ He had been encountered by God in a way that is not dissimilar from Paul and he believed that the gospel invites us to radically realign the way that we order our lives...which is, indeed, Paul's message in first Corinthians, right? The gospel—the good news—fundamentally re-orientes how we live. Oscar Romero was challenged and changed by this gospel. Once bishop he began to speak out about the injustice that he was seeing in his

¹² You can read more about his work online: <https://www.iep.utm.edu/ellacuri/>.

¹³ Read more about Romero online: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Óscar_Romero.

country, preaching that people must stop the violence and stand as Christians against injustice. He was perceived as a political threat because of the gospel he preached and was assassinated while he was serving communion...literally shot as he holding up the body and blood of Christ. In the weeks prior to his death he had said: "If they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadoran people."¹⁴ I remember hearing this quote and thinking: this is quite strange...he's dead, how can/could he be resurrected amongst the people? Yet, I'll never forget the day on the 30th anniversary of his assassination when I walked down the street with over 200,000 people as we chanted together about resurrection life and I thought: "This is part of the witness of resurrection and precisely what he was taking about...that we *together* carry this resurrection promise in our lives, in the way that we live."

Until this weekend I had forgotten that this experience had impacted me so greatly that I wrote my final statement of faith for seminary around the theme of "Resurrection: A Story of Faith." *La Relidad*. The real is that our lives know pain, that we know cancer, that we know going to sleep. But for Paul, for Ellacuria, for Romero, and for me, the challenge of the gospel is that the death-dealing machinations of our world do not get the final word. This is a good news that embodies the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who I referenced last week in the same quote that I want to bring back here:

"Redemption myths arise from the human experience of boundaries, but Christ takes hold human beings in the midst of our lives."¹⁵

The good news of the gospel isn't just some nice thing that we think about to feel better for a moment or that keeps us from having to know the real of our lives or the real of the world, no—it is that which enters in the places precisely where we are undone, where we don't have the words, where we don't know what to say, and it breathes life that says: "This is not the final word."

I have to admit that when I saw this sermon title "Rise Up", I was like "Oh goodness-what is this title, Daniel (it was his chosen title when he was originally going to be preaching this morning)?" And I was going to change it, but then two things happened. One is that I thought that Daniel would have had something witty to say about it, which I don't have (sorry), so I thought that I should keep it because it's his. But then I had a second thought...I thought of a song. Anybody else hearing it in their head?

¹⁴ The full quote is: "I have often been threatened with death. I must tell you, as a Christian, I do not believe in a death without resurrection. If am killed, I shall arise again in the Salvadoran people...You may say, if they succeed in killing me, that I pardon and bless those who do it. Would, indeed, that they might be convinced that they will waste their time. A bishop will die, but God's church, which is the people, will never perish." See: http://www.razonypalabra.org.mx/anteriores/n19/19_hegil.html#14a

¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010, 448.

Rise up
 If you livin' on your knees, you rise up
 Tell your brother that he's gotta rise up
 Tell your sister that she's gotta rise up
 When are folks like me and you gonna rise up?
 Every city, every hood, we need to rise up
 All my soldiers, what's good? We need to rise up
 We ain't got no other choice, we need to rise up
 Rise up!

....

I am not throwing away my shot.
 I am not throwing away my shot.

Anybody? I see that hand—Thank you! It's from the musical *Hamilton* about the founding of our country.¹⁶ Here's what I started thinking about...this musical, and the story of the founding of our country, made me think about this passage and the early church in Corinth to whom Paul was writing because I mean what bunch of idiots (don't worry, I'll keep going!)—the founders of our nation were risking their entire lives, giving everything they had to believe in a vision of freedom, of hope, of the ability to vote, of rights. They believed in this vision and gave their lives to it. As the song says: "I got rise up...rise up...rise up."

Man, this makes me think First Corinthians! This rag-tag group of folks comes together because they believed in another vision of reality. As Kyle challenged us a few weeks ago, the body of Christ that Paul is referring to in this letter is about this new way of living; its the body politic that changes how we orient ourselves to all of reality—that resurrection and the promise of new life in the midst of going to sleep is about the fundamental reordering of everything. The God who holds us is the holder of all reality...the place where the connection between sin and death is broken. Where the *shalom* vision of peace of which the Jewish Scriptures had witnessed is now ours through Christ.

Yes, we will, we will all go to sleep.

Death is part of all of our stories.

But the God of resurrection life holds and encounters us in the midst of that coming sleep...asking and inviting and challenging us to live in a way that bears witness to resurrection life. Calling us to be a people who will *rise up*, who will not throw away our shot to live in transformed ways of being until the very last

¹⁶ From the musical *Hamilton*. The song is "My Shot." See: <https://genius.com/Original-broadway-cast-of-hamilton-my-shot-lyrics>.

moment when we have the breath in the bodies we know now. I Corinthians 6⁰³ echoes through the centuries with a call even more radical than that of *Hamilton*...so will we be a people who will rise up and believe in this vision and give and live our lives so as to see it made real?

Yes, this isn't some pill that I can give you that fixes everything—which I wish I had. It's not a magic wand that rids us of injustice or suffering or cancer.

But maybe it's something more revolutionary than that.

We will all go to sleep, but this resurrection life, *this* resurrection promise is that which will always have the final word.

So let us be a people who are willing to risk the terror of resurrection¹⁷—who are willing to rise into the places we called to be...to be with and for one another, no matter what may be, and to bear witness to the risen Christ whose life fundamentally alters all human history, all of political relationships, and all things.

The prayer from the Puritans that Daniel shared on Dawn's Caring Bridge blog two days ago is this: "God, grant me more and more of the resurrection life. May it rule in me, and may I walk in its power."¹⁸

Let us rise.

Let us rise up.

Let us follow this God of resurrection.

Let us bear witness to this good news: that even as we go to sleep, God's power and love and resurrection life holds us all...

as we are with and hold you, Dawn.

Let us rise up.

AMEN.

¹⁷ Christine M. Smith in *Risking the Terror: Resurrection in this Life* writes: "Resurrection as process, not moment; resurrection as neighborhood and community transformation; resurrection as bodily integrity; resurrection as a refusal to play cards with the jailer; resurrection as resistance and insurrection; resurrection as coming out; resurrection as remembrance and presence; and resurrection as that which we practice...may these images lead us to claim and name every conceivable expression of resurrection life among us." Christine Smith, *Risking the Terror: Resurrection in this Life* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2001), 113.

¹⁸ Daniel referenced this prayer in the journal on Dawn's Caring Bridge site. February 15, 2019. See: <https://www.caringbridge.org/visit/dawnharrell/journal>

20 So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. **21** For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

6 As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. **2** For he says, “At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.” See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! **3** We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, **4** but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, **5** beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; **6** by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, **7** truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; **8** in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; **9** as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; **10** as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

What are we ambassadors of?

It matters what kind of dust you think you are for this is that of which you will be an ambassador.

Ashes to Ashes, Dust: What kind of dust does Christ make of you?

Might we be ambassadors of the dust of reconciliation and life and love and salvation for our souls.

Receive this blessing of the dust:

BLESSING THE DUST

All those days
you felt like dust,
like dirt,
as if all you had to do
was turn your face
toward the wind

and be scattered
to the four corners

or swept away
by the smallest breath
as insubstantial—

did you not know
what the Holy One
can do with dust?

This is the day
we freely say
we are scorched.

This is the hour
we are marked
by what has made it
through the burning.

This is the moment
we ask for the blessing
that lives within
the ancient ashes,
that makes its home
inside the soil of
this sacred earth.

So let us be marked
not for sorrow.
And let us be marked
not for shame.
Let us be marked
not for false humility
or for thinking
we are less
than we are

but for claiming
what God can do
within the dust,
within the dirt,
within the stuff
of which the world
is made

and the stars that blaze
in our bones
and the galaxies that spiral
inside the smudge
we bear.

—Jan Richardson
from *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons*¹

You are from dust.
You are beloved dust

did you not know
what the Holy One
can do with dust?

Might we be ambassadors of this good news and great love:

the stars that blaze
in our bones
and the galaxies that spiral
inside the smudge
we bear.

Amen.

¹ Jan Richardson, "Blessing the Dust," *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons* (Orlando: Wanton Gospeller, 2015).



Closer to Fine

Psalm 22

Plea for Deliverance from Suffering and Hostility

To the leader: according to The Deer of the Dawn. A Psalm of David.

- 1** *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?*
- 2** *O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.*
- 3** *Yet you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.*
- 4** *In you our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and you delivered them.*
- 5** *To you they cried, and were saved;
in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.*
- 6** *But I am a worm, and not human;
scorned by others, and despised by the people.*
- 7** *All who see me mock at me;
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;*
- 8** *“Commit your cause to the Lord; let God deliver—
let God rescue the one in whom God delights!”*
- 9** *Yet it was you who took me from the womb;
you kept me safe on my mother’s breast.*
- 10** *On you I was cast from my birth,
and since my mother bore me you have been my God.*
- 11** *Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.*
- 12** *Many bulls encircle me,
strong bulls of Bashan surround me;*
- 13** *they open wide their mouths at me,
like a ravening and roaring lion.*
- 14** *I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;*
- 15** *my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.*
- 16** *For dogs are all around me;
a company of evildoers encircles me.
My hands and feet have shriveled;*
- 17** *I can count all my bones.
They stare and gloat over me;*
- 18** *they divide my clothes among themselves,
and for my clothing they cast lots.*
- 19** *But you, O Lord, do not be far away!*



O my help, come quickly to my aid!

20 *Deliver my soul from the sword,
my life from the power of the dog!*

21 *Save me from the mouth of the lion!
From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.*

22 *I will tell of your name to my siblings;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:*

23 *You who fear the Lord, praise God!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify God;
stand in awe of God, all you offspring of Israel!*

24 *For God did not despise or abhor
the affliction of the afflicted;
God did not hide his face from me,
but heard when I cried out.*

25 *From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear God.*

26 *The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the Lord.
May your hearts live forever!*

27 *All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the Lord;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before God.*

28 *For dominion belongs to the Lord,
and God rules over the nations.*

29 *To God, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
before God shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for God.*

30 *Posterity will serve God;
future generations will be told about the Lord,*

31 *and proclaim God's deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that God has done it.*

-Psalm 22 (NRSV)

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God, on this good and glorious morning, we give you thanks for life. We give you thanks that you are a God who is never far off, but a God who is, indeed, with us. A God who attends dance parties and celebrates the beauty of your creation and your image in each of us. So God, for those of us today in this room, for whom your love feels far off, we pray that you would come close. And for the places in our own hearts where your love has yet to reach, God by your Spirit in the way that you do, will you move in? Make home here in our midst and in our hearts that we might be a part of the people who throughout all generations proclaim your goodness, your love, your mercy, and your truth. For it's in your name that we gather, and we live and breathe... AMEN.

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Well, last week if you were here, you heard Joe McDonald (formerly of Upper Room and now the Executive Director of VEAP) wonder aloud about what I might possibly have to preach about in relationship to Psalm 22? After hearing sermons from Marie and Daniel, and Jeff, and Joe... I make five. That's right. Five sermons all on Psalm 22.

Yeah....this sermon is going to go well (ha!). I laugh to myself because one of my favorite things about the fact that five of us are preaching on the same Psalm, but I wasn't ever particularly worried that I would be unable to find something left to say, because each of us come from our unique perspective, our own locations, and that's the place from where I get to speak today.

I think hearing the Bible from a multitude of perspectives is important. When I was growing up, I only had one main preacher who week-in and week-out taught us about the Bible. Not that my pastor's perspective wasn't true or helpful, it's just that no one perspective is never complete; each of our lenses on the world are both beautiful, but also not the full breadth of human perspectives. If you hear from a woman who has experienced childbirth, her reflection on the creation groaning as if in childbirth will be different than that of someone who hasn't been pregnant....necessarily so. And this matters. So today, I want to invite you to journey with me into my perspective on Psalm 22. The sermon title "Closer to Fine," came to me after I was listening to a song mix that I had made for our recent trip to Cambodia in partnership with Fair Anita as a way to encourage the young women, and this song was on it.¹

I remember the first time I heard this song. I was over at a friend's house and day during high school. For a little bit of context, this friend of mine was a hippie. Like a bonafide hippie. Her family went out to this camp in the middle of nowhere—it didn't have electricity or a telephone and was nestled in the Washington mountains, a small ELCA camp called Holden Village. And so my Lutheran, hippie friend played this song by the Indigo Girls called "Closer to Fine" one day when myself along with one of my Baptist friends were over to a hang out. And I remember listening to the lyrics, both liking the song, but feeling some level of anxiety as well because the song included lyrics such as "all these answers pointing me in a crooked line. And, the less I seek my source for some definitive, the closer I am to fine."

And Baptist Sara was feeling a little anxious because for me following Jesus as I understood it precisely meant that there *wasn't* any crooked lines, there was only one line and it looked like clear and very straight. For in all honesty, I really believed that following Jesus gave me all the answers.

Well, as it turns out, I have now lived a few years past being 17 and having all of the answers. And, as it turned out, over time I've come to realize that the journey of life in faith is a little bit more complicated than the narratives that sometimes we tell ourselves where we think if we insert A, we for sure get out B, right? "I go to church. I love Jesus. I love my neighbor. I'm a good Christian. Everything is going to work out the way that I hope it will." Right?

¹ Indigo Girls, "Closer to Fine," *Indigo Girls* (Los Angeles: Epic, 1989).



And indeed, sometimes it all goes beautifully, right? Sometimes life is more glorious and wonderful than we could ever imagine. But, sometimes life gets interrupted. We experience cancer or a loved one dies. Our bodies don't work the way we want. Our kids don't end up following the path that we had hoped for them. The person whom we have loved for years no longer loves us back. And the question and the residual that remains, for me anyway, is: Is God still present on the journey when the journey doesn't look the way we had hoped? Is God still with us in the midst of the silences? Is the Psalmist right here when the Psalmist feels like God has completely forgotten him? What is the story we tell about our lives and about who this God is when the story doesn't turn out the way we hoped, when the answers point in a crooked line?

So we come to Psalm 22. This is a Psalm of lament, meaning a place inside of Scripture where the writer is incredibly honest about the fact that their life doesn't look the way that they wish it would. The psalm starts off with a complaint and a cry for help. Even as you heard that back and forth of the affirmations of trust, the "but, yet," which Joe highlighted for us last week, it is in the midst of affirming trust for God, the the psalm then moves to a cry for help, clarifying the nature of the trouble that he feels, telling God that the bad stuff is God's fault. I'm sure, none of us have ever felt that way, right? I heard that! So, okay, at least one of us. Thank you, Jeff, for helping me out.

After this opening, there's an extended cry for help. And then as Daniel talked about, the psalm modulates to a more bright key, anticipating the stories of God's future deliverance, and reminding the community of how God is present. So I'd like to name a few things about this psalm, a few potential ways to understand it.

One of the offerings I think this psalm brings to us is that it opens up space for us to wonder about what was David experiencing in writing it. One of the options may be that David himself was in an acute period of a mental health struggle. Maybe he was dealing with depression? And for him in the middle of that space, as for anyone who lives with depression, the struggle is so real where one might actually not feel human, but like the Psalmist, maybe you feel like you are a worm because you are so beaten down.

You feel alone and isolated and even as we, your community, might seek to affirm you and say, "Hey, we care about you. We are here for you. We don't think you are nothing!" that doesn't change how you are feeling. And it's important to me that we name this as one of the options for what's going on in this psalm because for too long, and often in faith communities, we've treated people who are living with mental illness like they have some special sort of sickness which places them outside of the mercy and love and presence of God...the place where they believe themselves to be and are treated like they are worms. And this psalm offers an opportunity to interrupt that narrative and remind us that one of the songs in the cannon of Jewish worship and now ours is one which acknowledges that whatever we struggle with, whatever pain we carry, God can handle us raging about it and naming those realities.



Another potential read of the psalm that may resonate for others, is that the psalmist is exploring what it means to be in a space of acute grief; what it means when the story doesn't go the way that we had hoped or wanted it to. And maybe some of you felt this way, where it's just too much and you feel absolutely alone. It doesn't matter that you actually aren't in that moment. In that moment, you can't quite remember yet. You've forgotten that actually, there are like quite a few people who love you, and care for you, and are with you. And you aren't alone in your suffering and grief.

Again, remember that Psalms are a part of worship and as such this song may serve as that affirmation to anyone who is in grief as a reminder that we aren't alone. And even if we don't know everyone super well in this community, if we will just take a step of vulnerably to move towards one another, and name our truths, saying, "I've got to be real with you, I'm struggling." And instead of trying to fix or dismiss one another's complexities in our lives, we turn towards each other and just let one another know that we are there; that we are the embodiment of God's faithful yes to us. That's what it means to be community: that don't have to be afraid of the dark because we are a people of resurrection. And we get the opportunity to be that to kind of life to and for one another.

A third read of this Psalm, which is connected to the second one is that the psalm is naming what happens in those moments where we've internalized a narrative that tells us that God is only with us if things are good. Let's dissect that for a second. I don't know about you, but I have a lot of good in my life. I have food. I have water. I have enough air to breathe. I have a home that is safe and very cute...if I do say so myself! I have a wonderful spouse. I have family, and friends who have become family. I have an amazing job. I get to participate with people in the real of their lives, testifying together to the goodness of the love of God and Christ, wondering together what it means to be transformed, living out the goodness of a good news that says God's love is for all.

But that's not everyone's story. And of course, it's also not the fullness of my story either. But what happens if we think that only a good life proves that God is with us? How do you make sense of being laid off from your job then? Did God abandon you? Did you do something wrong that places you outside of God's grace? If we think God is only with us in the good things, then God necessarily to be absent in the bad. And that theology is harmful to us. And not just to us who actually have very privileged and good lives by and large: what does this belief mean then for people who are in literally living in refugee camps? Did they somehow sin more than us?

Maybe David had internalized part of that narrative. He's like, "I'm a king. I'm doing God's thing. I'm after God's heart. Everything's going well. God must be with me." If so, then David missed the point. God wasn't with him because he was king. God wasn't with him because he had all this money. God loved David when he was a shepherd just because he was David: made in God's image, and God cared about his heart. So this psalm offers an opportunity for us to complexify our vision of how God shows up, where we get to say, "God with us, means God is with us in the most



challenging and painful darkness, as God is indeed with us in the most brilliant of light.”

So whether it was because of a struggle with depression, isolation, grief and or a theology that had tutored him to think God was only for him in the good times, this Psalm opens up to us, its readers, a space for the real of our lives and our laments and serves as an encouragement that in our own Bible are affirmations of grief and doubt and that this is an important element of our worship and life of faith.

Now, to me, the way this psalm opens up space to affirm human suffering gets really intriguing when you consider the connections between this psalm, and particularly the way that Matthew tells the story of Jesus’s crucifixion. Psalm 22 is quoted in both Mark 15:34 and Matthew 27:46 as Jesus cries from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” There seem to be other connections between this Psalm and the telling of Jesus’ crucifixion. In Mark 15:29 and in Matthew 27:39, it connects with the language in Psalm 22:7 with the passer-bysers of the crucifixion, “All who see me mock me. They make their mouths at me. They shake their heads.” And it seems that Matthew 27:43 connects to Psalm 22:8. “Commit your cause to the Lord. Let God deliver. Let God rescue the one in whom God delights.” And all four of the Gospels talk about the crucifixion with language just like in this psalm does.

Additionally, it seems that Psalm 22:15 is probably in the author’s mind in John 19:28, where it records Jesus as saying, “I am thirsty”, and that Jesus had to say this in order to fulfill scripture. That’s probably Psalm 22:15. Isn’t that cool?

It’s super cool. Really cool.

Let me tell you why I think it’s really cool. Because particularly in the book of Matthew which was written to a Jewish audience, an audience who would have known this Psalm from worship it’s making a connection between David’s life and what is happening with Jesus on the cross.

In making this connection, it affirms that Jesus himself knows the depth of human suffering, and sees us and is with and for us in it. And so no matter what darkness, no matter how alone, no matter how abandoned, no matter how silent God might feel, God is with us. God knows it and gets it. That’s why we say “Emmanuel, God with us.” I don’t know about you, but to me, this is really good news. It’s good news, which invites and challenges us that we don’t have to be a people who skip over the complexities and the pain in our own stories, nor do we need to be a people who do that to one another. But instead through Psalm 22, in the very words of Jesus on the cross, we get invited into the heart of the struggle and suffering and are reminded that God is with us. For me, that’s good news.

Our best friends two summers ago, well, just over a year ago, experienced the devastating loss of miscarriage. Being best friends, we didn’t want to copy them, but we also miscarried in December. Well, they just had a most beautiful baby named Owen a couple weeks ago, which is wonderful. But back when we knew they were



pregnant again I sent them a card. On the card was a bunny rabbit on a bike. I don't know why the bunny was on a bike, but I digress. So there's a point A, and then there's a point B on the card and between them is a line....which is, of course, straight... That was the bunny's intended bike path. But when you open the card you get to see the bunny's actually route between A and B and it's a more circuitous way.

And we sent them that card to say, "Hey, we get it. We know that sometimes life doesn't look the way that we thought or wanted it to."

But this is the good news: God is with us in our suffering and the crooked lines of how life actually works out. God is present and we get to be present to one another and not be alone. Indeed, we are invited to love each other, to bear witness to good news. This reminds me a lot of the admonition from Hebrews 12. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and the perfecter of our faith." Listen to this part, "For the joy set before him, He endured the cross, scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who likewise endures such opposition, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."

The words of the psalmist are a true testimony to human experience, and Jesus echoes them on the cross as a reminder to us that we are not alone, that- as the song reminds us: not only that is our life not going to unfold much like a straight line, and that God's present in that, whatever it looks like...but even more so, it become an invitation to embrace the crooked lines as where God is present with us. For maybe, just maybe: "The less I seek my source for some definitive, the closer I am (and we will be) to fine." And that's the second beauty of this psalm and of Christ echoing the words: to embrace the life that is pointing us in a crooked line.

For Christianity isn't designed to be the pill that keeps us safe from having to endure any harm. No, it's not the answer book that fixes and saves us from the hard things. No, this is not the good news. The good news, my friends is that yes, life is hard but we have a God who became one of us and is with us, a God who loves us and calls us beloved. And no matter our mess (or beauty), we are image bearers of God's goodness. And embracing the crooked line of life frees us to dance, to bear witness, and to love,...for we don't have to live afraid and ashamed as if we were worms. Because as Joe reminded us last week, God is here. God knows and God loves.

So may we internalize and embrace the promise of the God who is with us no matter what we face. And may we in turn be people of this good news: that God so loved that God walked amongst us.

God is with us, no matter what comes on this journey, and God's love is for us.

Let us be a people who bear witness with our lives to that good news. And then maybe we'll sing together with the Indigo Girls that:



I went to the doctor, I went to the mountains
I looked to the children, I drank from the fountains

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There's more than one answer to these questions
Pointing me in a crooked line

And the less I seek my source for some definitive
The closer I am to fine, yeah
The closer I am to fine, yeah.²

“The closer we are to fine.”

And that, is just fine.

Let us pray together. God, for your gift of love that reaches down into the real of our lives, the love that walks amongst us, calling us home...God, you know that we are a people who get afraid. We are a people who sometimes don't want to be loved. But God I and we believe in resurrection. So come by your Spirit in this season of Lent and remind us that there is no valley so deep nor any mountain so high that you do not journey with us. And may we likewise journey with one another and be a people who bear witness to this good news in the world that you are present in the crooked lines. For it's in your name we pray. Amen.

² “Closer to Fine.”



Into Your Hands

Luke 23:44-49

44 It was about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, 45 because of an eclipse of the sun. Then the curtain in the sanctuary was torn in two, 46 and Jesus uttered a loud cry and said, "Abba, into your hands I commend my spirit."

Saying this, Jesus breathed for the last time.

47 The centurion who saw this glorified God, saying, "Surely this one was innocent." 48 When the crowds that had gathered for the spectacle saw what had happened, they returned home beating their breasts and weeping. 49 All the acquaintances of Jesus and the women who had come with him from Galilee stood at a distance, looking on.

- Luke 23:44-49 (NRSV)

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Will you pray with me? Into your hands, into your hands, oh God, we commend our spirits and to all things. Amen.

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I wanted to begin tonight with a poem. It's called What To Do In Darkness.

What To Do In Darkness

Go slowly.
Consent to it, but don't wallow in it.
Know it as a place of germination and growth.
Remember the light, take an outstretched hand if you find one.
Exercise unused senses, find the path by walking it.
Practice trust.
Watch for dawn.¹

Fear is a very real human condition. It's not just the fear of death itself, but fears of many different kinds and things. Some of us have maybe sillier fears...like the terror of sharks in Minnesota lakes. Anybody? Bueller? Just me? Ok.

¹ Marilyn McEntyre, "What to do in Darkness," *Weavings: A Journal of the Christian Spiritual Life* (March 2004): Accessed online: <http://www.ayearofbeinghere.com/2013/12/marilyn-mcentyre-what-to-do-in-darkness.html>



Some of us fear the loss of relationships; we fear what would happen if we were to say our truth aloud. We fear what if we actually revealed who we are to one another, and then the other turns away in disgust?

To fear is totally human. If you fear, welcome to being human with the rest of us.

On the eve of the rise of National Socialism in Germany, a young Jewish philosopher named Hannah Arendt was just beginning to launch her academic career. She ended up escaping Nazi Germany, eventually settling in the United States, but spent the rest of her life wrestling and seeking understanding of the operation of evil in our world. In one of her books, originally featured as a set of articles in *The New Yorker*, she observed and commented on the well-publicized trial, of the SS leader and major organizer of the “Final Solution:” Adolf Eichman.

Her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* details this experience of witnessing his trial and names what she calls “the banality of evil.” What she meant by this is how evil doesn’t show up in our world as a monster. It’s not like a Disney villain. No, evil is much more insidious and administrative than that. It’s what happens when good people, normal human people get afraid and obey saying: “I was just doing my job. I didn’t want to ruffle any feathers.”² This is the banal operation of evil that is borne in the waters of fear.

A couple of weeks ago, during the Deeper Dive, the conversation led to talking about Esther and this moment where Mordecai says to Esther, “Perhaps you were born for such a time as this,” regarding when she goes in before the King, in the face of the possibility of her people getting killed. And she says to the king, please don’t do this, don’t exterminate my people. But by going to the King—if he had not extended his scepter—she would have been killed. Now this story that we know, of course, it has a happy ending, right? Everyone gets saved. Everything’s good. But here on the eve of Jesus’s death, the story doesn’t look so nice at this point. And in fact, Jesus actually does die. This is the moment in the face of the final finality he says, “Into your hands, I commit my Spirit.” And what a profoundly wonderful gift of grace for human people like you and I, some of us knowing more intimately, the fear of death or the wishing it weren’t coming. Some of us knowing fear in many other ways though, too. What happens if I speak my truth? What happens if I’m a whistleblower in my organization? What happens when or if?

We all have these places of fear. And in this moment, interrupts some good news where God in Christ, in the face of the ultimate terror says, “Into your hands,” we open our hands and are likewise invited to answer the question. Will we likewise open our hands and trust of the goodness of God and God’s love because here’s the thing: during Lent, and particularly during Holy Week, we affirm the of death and resurrection as a part of our faith. So it shouldn’t surprise us, that this is the part of the story that Jesus-in the face of death- says, “Into your hands I commit my Spirit.”

² Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963).



We've been told these passages, right? Life and death. They go together. We read things like John 12:24-25 (from *The Message*):

Listen carefully: Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat. But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is destroys that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal.

Or Galatians 2:20 (NRSV) reads, " I have been crucified with Christ; 20 and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Or Luke 9:23-24 (NIV):

Then he said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. 24 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it.

And then many of you may know this passage from Romans 6:3-11 (IB). I'll just read a part of it.

Don't you know that when we were baptized into Christ Jesus, we were baptized into Christ's death? We've been buried with Jesus through baptism, and we joined with Jesus in death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by God's glory, we too might live a new life.

Right, so this story, that life comes from death, is central to the Christian message. We know that it's human. We've lived this: live out of death in our own lives. And yet we're still human, right? I am, at least. We still get afraid. We still have the places that feel like they're going to kill us. "If we go there. Oh my goodness. If I have that conversation, I literally might die." Maybe not actually, literally you might not die, but it might feel like it, right? So we come to this moment where, to me again, it's one of those moments of God's grace saying to us, "Listen, I get it. We all get afraid. And that's part of why Christ came to live and to die amongst us: as a fundamental affirmation that death doesn't actually win. That love holds and sustains all of us."

Biblical scholar, Greg Carey, wrote about Jesus' final words recorded in Luke and noted: "For Luke, and for good theology, Jesus approaches his death just as he lived."³ We all know the kind of bad theology that has little to say about Jesus apart from his death. It almost seems that Luke knows this kind of theology too. Jesus' death here in Luke is *for you* in a profound way. It's an essential component of the gospel story, but in a unique way, Luke demonstrates how Jesus faced death just as he lived: with open hands.

³ Greg Carey, "Commentary on Luke 23:32-47," *Working Preacher* (Accessed April 16, 2019): https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1655.



“Into your hands I commit my spirit.”

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This passage that we read from Luke hearkens back to Psalm 31, which interestingly Daniel Harrell read to the staff the day that he shared with us about his beloved Dawn’s diagnosis of cancer. And Jeff also shared Psalm 31 this afternoon with the Harrell family. Psalm 31:1-5 (NRSV) reads:

- 1 In you, O Lord, I seek refuge;
do not let me ever be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me.
- 2 Incline your ear to me;
rescue me speedily.
- Be a rock of refuge for me,
a strong fortress to save me.
- 3 You are indeed my rock and my fortress;
for your name’s sake lead me and guide me,
- 4 take me out of the net that is hidden for me,
for you are my refuge.
- 5 Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.

It’s like you can hear it again and again, in Luke and Psalm 31: “Into your hands, into your hands.” And in the moment of his death. Jesus, likewise answers the question: Do you trust yourself to God with a fundamental, “Yes.”

Here, in his death, Jesus models to us that no terror, least of these, death, can separate us from God’s love. And this is our invitation to likewise be a people who live with our hands open, say: “Into your hands. Into your hands.”

Here’s the other thing: we are called to live as a people who believe in resurrection, that the places where we are sure that they will kill us are actually *precisely* the places where God’s resurrection life lives. We follow this good news and many of us have lived this in our own lives and we are called to live this resurrection promise in view of the fears that we are sure will kill us.

This past summer, I lived one of these moments. Some of you know that my brother, Luke has lived with an active addiction to alcohol for over a decade. A year ago in March, he became sober, which is wonderful. He came through town and saw my spouse, Andy and I, and then he went east to New York because he’s snowbird caddy. While he was there, he began to experience an acute mental health crisis. On Sunday, June 10th I preached a sermon, “Breathe In,” here at this church. Monday of that week, I called my brother and as he was talking, I began looking up diagnoses to understand what was happening to him. The next Sunday, I preached again, and the following Monday I spoke with my brother again when he and his girlfriend made the decision that he would come back to Minnesota as I’m his only living family member.



On Tuesday of that week I woke up with pneumonia. Why? Because when I was a little girl at three and a half, I decided it was my job to take care of him. And my body still believed that. Summer was a harrowing time, both for me and my brother because the location of my own terror was that I didn't know how to forgive myself if my brother didn't live and I didn't. And the terror felt consuming. I didn't know how to live with the beauty of my life in the face of the suffering he was enduring.

I told my therapist, it felt like I was walking the edge of a cliff and my brother was down in the abyss crying out, "Sara, help me." And I just wanted to jump in after him, but I knew that if I did that, we both would die. Metaphorically, at least because the truth is I never could have saved him. And on this path I was walking on the edge of the abyss to my right was a rolling beautiful green hill filled with beautiful flowers, and my wonderful Andy was standing in the field, loving me in a way that good former addiction therapists do, with his hands open saying, "Babe, please remember your life."

So last week when I was at a birthday party, I was posed the question: what was the most important decision you made this year? And I said, "I chose my life." I chose to live in the face of my own terror, of not knowing what the end of this would be for my brother. I knew I had to go into the darkness of myself and my own story and fear. If I, in any way, could affirm the truth that I live and believe- that this is a God of resurrection; to say yes to the healing I needed in my own life...but I had to choose that. And it wasn't easy. It was the most painful decision I've made as an adult. And I didn't know what would happen. I'm telling you the story today having gotten received permission from my brother, who I spoke with this morning. My brother and his doctors were able to get him back into a place where his mental has stabilized...and he just celebrated a year of sobriety, which is wonderful. But here's the thing: I didn't know if that would be the end of the story, but either way I couldn't change or write it for the story was between my brother and God. And as for me, I had to face my fear and release in order to find my own way into life and freedom in the midst of my terror.

I don't know what those places are in your life: the places that feel like if you were to touch them, they might kill you. But I do know this: that healing doesn't happen by trying to avoid those spaces. Healing happens as we gently and tenderly move into them with our hands open saying, "Okay, God, I trust you." As we go into the darkness—it's there that we find these places of resurrection, promise, and life.

When I was flying back from Cambodia last month, I was reading *American Flight* magazine, it was from the famous surfer Laird Hamilton who said: "People should get scared. It's good for our systems. Fear makes you see better. It makes you think better—once you're used to harnessing it."⁴

⁴ Beau Flemlister, "The Fear Factor" *American Magazine* (March 2019: 67-79): 73. Access online: <https://americanway.ink-live.com/html5/reader/production/default.aspx?pubname=&edid=6c762fac-3286-4603-9357-b49495943bc6>



So many of us have been taught to fear fear. And I wonder what if instead we **620** befriended it? What if we took it as an invitation, deeper into the freedom and the trueness of life that the gospel promises?

Some of you may have read Daniel quoting Jerry Sittser: "The quickest way for anyone to reach the sun and the light of day is not to run west, chasing after the setting sun, but to head east, plunging into the darkness until one comes to the sunrise."⁵

And I tell you what: by going into my own terror, it's what allowed me this December, in the middle of miscarrying, to sit across the table from my spouse, to feel the sacredness of God's Spirit's presence. And to realize that I had chosen my life and that God was about healing me. I had chosen myself and my life. And that is why indeed we say and can affirm: "Into your hands, I commit my spirit" . We, like Jesus, are invited to be an "into your hands" kind of people...who go into the darkness, who face our fear, trusting that life, that resurrection life is always the point and, indeed, it is our promise.

So tonight as we come to the table and this time of communion, may you come with whatever it is that you carry, whatever the place is of longing or the fear you hold, whatever those may be in find that at this table, its healing is light.

No matter what may be, may this be an act of open-handed surrender: "Into your hands. Into your hands we commit our spirits."

And may we then journey through the long night towards the promised morn that we will indeed see together, for love heals our as turn and face them, opening our hands in surrender.

Amen.

⁵ Daniel Harrell, "Dawn Harrell Caringbridge Journal Entry," *Caring Bridge* (April 17, 2019): <https://www.caringbridge.org/visit/dawnharrell/journal>.



The Story to be Written

John 21:15-25

"When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.'

A second time he said to him, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.'

He said to him the third time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything, you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep. Very truly I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fashion your own belt and to go wherever you wished but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.' He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God. After this he said to him, 'Follow me.'

Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them. He was the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper and had said, 'Lord, who is it that is going to betray you?' When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, 'Lord, what about him?' Jesus said to him, 'If it is my will that he remained until I come, what does that to you? Follow me.'

So the rumor spread in the community that this disciple would not die. Yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, 'But if it is my will, that he remain until I come. What is that to you?' This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them. And we know that his testimony is true, but there are also many other things that Jesus did. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written well."

-John 21:15-25

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Well, I'm really excited that I get to bat clean up, though I'm not sure exactly how that works when there's only one person who was up and they already hit a home run, but nevertheless, we'll stick with the baseball analogy for a minute.

In fact, I'd like to continue that analogy...for those of you who watch or listen to sports, you know what a commentator is, right? Yes, probably? Now, my grandma was a huge Minnesota Vikings fan to go to another sport and she would get so upset at the T.V. commentators every time the Vikes were losing that she would turn on K-FAN.



Well, the same thing kind of happens with folks who write about the Bible. There are people called commentators who narrate the story for people like us and sometimes you read them and you think, "That's a nice call." Or, "I don't really agree with that particular one." It might come as no surprise then that the commentators on this passage for John, who are disproportionately male, do not usually choose to include the story about Mary as the one of four times that Jesus appears to his followers. We typically only count the three where Jesus appears to the actual, male disciples.

Now if I'm being generous, there may be another reason why they also don't count Mary. Perhaps it's because of the role that the number three plays in the book of John? Earlier in John, before this passage in chapter 21, Peter denied Jesus three times. Here now, in our text for this morning, Jesus comes to John and three times ask him if John if he loves Jesus.

Some of you may have heard this passage talked about before, referencing the ways that in Greek, there are many different words for love, unlike in our English language. Sometimes when people talk about this, we talk about how *agape* love is the most true, the highest of all loves. But interestingly, here in this passage, when Jesus and Peter are talking back and forth, the first two times, Jesus says, "Do you love me?" He utilizes the word *agape*. And both times Peter respond with the word that becomes Philadelphia, *philos*, which is brotherly, sisterly, kind of this deep friendship, kinship sort of love. So Jesus says, "Do you love me (*agape*)?" Peter responds, "You know that I love you (*philos*)."

"Do you love me (*agape*)?" "You know that I love you (*philos*)."

And the third time Jesus himself says to Peter, "Peter, do you love me (*philos*)?" And Peter says, "You know that I do (*philos*)."

I bring this up just to highlight the fact that the intimacy of the relationship between Peter and Jesus is real. Sometimes we think that only love that super altruistic counts. But the kind of love that Jesus embodied was both a global love, but also a love of friendship and of family and of invitation back into connection even to those of us who, like Peter, forget our first love, have turned away, or maybe never knew that the love was ours. Jesus shows up and says precisely to him, and to us, "I don't care what the story's been. Do you love me? Then follow me. Follow me with your life."

The beauty of this is that no matter what kind of love it is, that love is both an invitation and it's also an expectation that we do something with our love. Love shows up, love is with, love is being present, and we see this here at the end of this text.

Meda Stamper's doctoral dissertation is "Performing Love: Entering the Future Through the Ending of John: A Narrative Theological Reading of John 21:15 through



25." Meda and I agree about a couple things about the very last verses in John. That last verse, verse 25, I think it's one of the funniest verses in the Bible. Maybe you don't read the Bible and laugh a lot, but I have these moments where I'm like, "That's really funny!" You know, John writes the book and was like, "Oh, by the way, we could have written a whole ton of books and all the world couldn't contain all the books and you know ..." Jeff has argued that the reason for this is because John was arrogant and he was like, "I've got the gospel right," and then he realized he couldn't. That makes this ending rather comedic!

Another reason for this ending is that it names an important truth, for how does one pen a story that captures every aspect of *anyone's* life? As you know, Dawn Harrell, the spouse of our senior minister, died this morning. Just last week she was writing notes for Violet, her 11 year old daughter, to have and to read at the milestones along her journey when her mother won't be able to be present. But those notes can't begin to capture everything I know that Dawn has already *lived* with Violet and Daniel and us. No book can ever fully pen those moments that you can't even find words for, let alone, how are you supposed to pen a story about Emmanuel, God with us? I mean, that seems easy, right? 21 chapters. Ready? Go. Good luck. I feel for John there.

But there's a third reason that I want to suggest for why the book ends here, and it resonates with Jeff's invitation: that we don't want to be a people who go home. It's this that John knew and affirmed: that the story of resurrection didn't end in John chapter 21:24. The story of God's resurrection is something that God has continued, and continues even to this day. We are invited to be a people who participate in writing resurrection stories. This is the story still to be written. It's a story that can hold space for the Good Fridays of our lives, the Holy Saturdays of darkness, and the resurrection moments where we know life at its sweetest.

We are invited to follow after John and pick up the pens, or the iPads, or however you write and write the story of resurrection in our lives. To answer when Jesus says, "Do you love me?" "You know I love you."

"So then follow me and write the resurrection story."

It's not just the stories in our own lives, but it's the resurrection stories that we are invited to participate in the world with God. Christine M. Smith in her book, *Risking the Terror: Resurrection in This Life* pens,

Resurrection as process, not moment. Resurrection as neighborhood and community transformation, resurrection as bodily integrity. Resurrection as refusing to play cards with the jailer. Resurrection as coming out, resurrection as remembrance and presence, and resurrection as that which we practice and we live with one another. May these images lead to claim and name every

¹ See: "Meda Stamper," *Working Preacher*.
https://www.workingpreacher.org/profile/default.aspx?uid=2-stamper_meda



conceivable expression of resurrection life among us.²

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The invitation of Easter is to not just go home, but to be a people who remain at this place and bear witness to the new life and the promise of resurrection in Christ. Then within our own lives, whatever it is we carry, whatever residual of pain or brokenness or human reality, we bear witness to resurrection together...n the relationships between us. In the ways we live in the world.

This is the story still to be written.

And every day we have a choice: Are you going to live the resurrection story? Will we live the resurrection story together?

There's not enough books in the whole world that could contain this story,. but we have this promise: God is not done writing yet. So, let's pick up our pens even as our hands shake, even as the tears fall, believing in the promise of Easter morn, that resurrection is indeed the end of the story.

Let's write resurrection stories together, my friends.

Amen.

² Christine M. Smith, *Risking the Terror: Resurrection in This Life* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2001), 113.



Holding Each Other Up

Exodus 17:8-16

8 Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. **9** Moses said to Joshua, “Choose some men for us and go out, fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand.” **10** So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. **11** Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. **12** But Moses’ hands grew weary; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; so his hands were steady until the sun set. **13** And Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the sword.

14 Then the Lord said to Moses, “Write this as a reminder in a book and recite it in the hearing of Joshua: I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.” **15** And Moses built an altar and called it, The Lord is my banner. **16** He said, “A hand upon the banner of the Lord The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.”

- Exodus 17:8-16

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God of resurrection, who makes beautiful things out of mud, bring life in the midst of the places of darkness in ours, bring healing in the spaces where we need your touch, and God grant us the courage in all things to incline our hearts and our whole lives to you. In your name we gather and pray.

Amen.

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Well, good morning. It's good to see you all on this Annual Meeting Sunday!

So this week, when it was decided that I was going to preach today, the very first thing that popped into my mind was this passage. I thought it was an appropriate passage, given both where we're at right now in the life of our congregation and also given that we are a people who are in the midst of the Easter season, having just celebrated it last week. And I'm excited to be able to delve into this passage together with you today and share with you why I think it popped into my mind.



Now, maybe not all of you were as equally excited as I was this week because the musical artist P!nk released a new album. Okay, so yeah- maybe not as excited. The album is called *It Hurts 2B Human*. The title track chorus goes something like this, "God, it hurts to be human, without you I'd be losing. God it hurts to be human, but I've got you. I've got you. And you got me, me, me too." And how true is this in each of our lives? So many times it hurts to be human. It hurts to love. It hurts to lose.¹

Of course, sometimes it's beautiful, but we don't get the beauty without the pain too, right? This is part of the very human story of our lives. And one of the things I love about the Bible is that it's not just an esoteric collection of sayings, but it's the story of people's journey with God. The book of Exodus is nothing less than this. It's the story of the Jewish people as they journeyed with God, as they wrestled with God, as they felt abandoned by God, as they sought to discover what it meant to be the people of God, one of the songs on their playlist could have been P!nk for indeed- it hurts to be human.

One of the beautiful things about stories and about songs is that they bring us back and remind us of the truths that we sometimes forget. The book of Exodus is no less than a remembrance for a community of Israel, who again and again, throughout their history experienced exile, persecution, violation, and destruction of their temple. Exodus is part of the song of remembrance that they were not forlorn or forsaken, but that no matter how much it hurt, no matter what happened, God was their banner, YHWH would indeed save them again.

It's no wonder then that the story of Exodus has been remembered throughout human history as a story of hope and assurance that God will deliver no matter what is happening. Inside of the African American community in this country under slavery, the tale of Exodus, the cry to Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" became the heart cry of black community and Negro spirituals like, "We Shall Overcome." Exodus is the cry for deliverance and the remembrance of a God who in the face of insurmountable odds, rescues God's people again and again. This is the cry that indeed animated so many civil rights activists during the 1960s as they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge embodying the cry: "Let my people go."

These songs and stories of liberation remind us that no matter how dark the night, no matter how staunch the oppressor seems to be in their resistance to our ability to live, YHWH God will save and redeem for we are not alone.

So one of my favorite things to do, this is a nerd alert to those of you who need those warnings, is that I love going through the whole of a biblical text in order to really get a sense of the narrative. Because again, this is a story of God and God's people that we find in these different books of the Bible, right? So here we go. We're going to do a little bit of that. I promise I won't make you do the entire book of Exodus. So let's start off in chapter one of Exodus where the Jewish people are now enslaved. They've begun to cry out to God in the midst of their oppression.

¹ P!nk, "Hurts 2B Human," *It Hurts 2B Human* (Hollywood: RCA Records, 2019).



Fast forward to chapter three (I told you, I'll go quickly). And at this point, this is where God appears to Moses and says, "I AM has sent you." That's what he's supposed to tell the Israelites. The sense of I AM is an affirmation that God is present, that God is with them and will be with them. In chapter five, Moses goes to Pharaoh and demands that Pharaoh let God's people go. We'll fast forward through all of the plagues in chapters five through twelve. Passover happens in chapter 12.

A couple points I want to pin for us: one of the really cool things is that when you read the Bible and go back to Exodus and pay attention to how this story is also the story that Jesus hearkens to in his own life and ministry, right? To a people who are under Roman rule, Jesus, on Maundy Thursday which we celebrate, is the renewed promise of Passover freedom that begins in Exodus 12.

Jesus is hearkening for us to remember the continued promise of God: that God will bring the people out. This happens in chapter 12, where the people are reminded that God will save them. And by chapter 14, they make their escape. *Spoiler alert.* And in chapter 15, Moses sings his song, as does Miriam because I can't leave her out. And then in chapter 15 begins the time where the Israelites are in the wilderness. This is the time that they spend between slavery and the the promised land. This theme of the wilderness, of being people in the exile, of the space between slavery and freedom, is a continued motif throughout all of Scripture. And we in so many ways likewise, in our own lives, know those spaces between the things that have kept us captive or harm us and the places of freedom and life. And the Israelites are precisely in this place by the time we get to chapter 15: the thin space of emergence from the dark womb into life.

So the Israelites in Ex. 15 are walking around in the wilderness and there's no water. There's no food. And they're like, "Are you serious, Moses? Could you not have just left us back in Egypt land? Because like, at least we had bread to eat." And they're not happy. And they begin to complain. God then shows up as a cloud. They're fed, they're cared for. And then we get to chapter 17, which we read today. In chapter 17, they get to Rephidim where again there isn't any water. This place, so named named, means rest (and place names matter in the Bible). And finally, we come to the passage that was read for today. Let me skip over that for a minute to say a few more things about what happens after our passage.

In chapter 18, which comes right after, the wilderness time is ending as they're coming to Mount Sinai and Moses says to his father-in-law that all of God's saving them has been evidence of God's goodness and grace that has brought them this far. And in chapter 19, then they go to Mount Sinai and Moses brings down the 10 commandments. Anybody? I'm figuring more of you have heard about this episode in the history of our faith than had heard of P!nk's new album, am I right?

I figured you had. And in the Sinai Periscope, as this section is called, the text begins to detail what it means to live as the people of God." And by the end of the book of Exodus, the tabernacle has been built, the place where God's presence rests. Okay, the end. You got through all of Exodus. Congratulations!



Again, remember this isn't just a one time historical account that's given just to tell us a nice history lesson. This is the story that was repeated throughout the life of the Israelite people. It was a story to remind them that God would be with them, that God would save them, that God would uplift them. It's a story to encourage them of YHWH's faithfulness, that YHWH would deliver, that God would be faithful to God's covenant, that God would indeed be present with them.

Here then in chapter 17:8-16, a lot of things happen. The first of them is that we're told that they're fighting against the Amalekites. These are desert dwellers with whom there is a lot of fighting throughout Israel's history. In this particular passage we read it's like the Amalekites keep coming and coming and coming and coming.

It's just like those times in your life when you think, "Please just leave me alone." Right? We were talking with our best friends last night and we just said, "Can't we get a break?" Right? Like too many people are coming and you just got to stop. And this is what's happening for the Israelites is that the Amalekites keep coming against their forces and they just want and need a break. We're then told that in the middle of the onslaughts, every time Moses' arms are raised the Israelites are winning.

I love the visual of that: Moses with arms raised. I love that because it's one of the most fundamental postures of surrender, right? My hands are up. I surrender. And for people who'd been wandering around the desert, they kept on forgetting—just like the rest of us do—that God would indeed save them. But here Moses puts up his hands and it's like an embodied way of saying, "Okay, I surrender. I don't have anything else here." But in holding up his arms and in saying, "We surrender and we know and trust that God save us."

But Moses' arms grow weary. Because if anyone's ever tried to do this for a length of time like I'm doing right now, you know that your arms start to hurt a little bit, right? Gravity wins.

And so along come Aaron and Hur and they each take one of Moses' arms and hold them up.

So a couple of observations about the holding up of arms. One is a little bit about Aaron and Hur. In the rabbinical literature, Hur is actually thought to be Miriam's son. And Hur is also the father of the man who ends up being the dominant builder of the tabernacle. And then it's argued that Aaron is the head of the Levites and the priestly line that comes to be. So if you think about it, Moses is being upheld by the tabernacle, the place where God's presence resides, *and* he's been upheld by the priestly line. So that's interesting, the way that that Moses is sustained and held is by God's presence and the worship of God. And in this way he's literally held up. And sustained.

And how many of us have known have also known what it feels like to be in those spaces where our arms just need to be held up? When we don't have anything left. It feels like the waves just keep coming. And these are the spaces where we are both in



desperate need and are so benefited by when we hold up each other's arms. 629

As you continue in this passage, this is the time where God is named as "the Lord is My Banner" (*Jehovah-nissi*). This is the only time here in scripture that God is so named. Another way to think about this would be "The Lord is My Refuge."

For any of you who watch anything like *Game of Thrones* or read any sort of historical medieval fiction, this idea of "The Lord is My Banner" might be evocative for you, right? This of the ways in which kingdoms or houses have their sigil and their flag that they wave and you know that if you are part of that house, you are under the protection of that house, that they will fight for you, that they will care for you, that it's the place that you run in the time of trouble. And this same understanding would have resonated for the Israelites. To say, "The Lord is My Banner" names that YHWH is that this is the house under which we are safe and we are cared for and we are loved.

And I've often heard it said at church that God's banner is over us. But one of the things I love about this passage is it's not just that we live under the banner of God, but also the reminder that we need each other to keep up our arms, to hold that posture of surrender when we don't know what's going to happen and we've been wandering around the wilderness requires and asks that we hold up each other's arms.

Jesus in so many ways in his life and ministry hearkens to this book of Exodus. And in so many ways Jesus is the new Moses, upheld at the right and the left, by the history of the Jewish texts and teachings, reminding people that indeed the new place of worship is actually not in a tabernacle, but it's in spirit and in truth. And that he himself is ushering in a new day of freedom for everyone, that the march for liberation that Exodus inaugurated is one that keeps going and Jesus is at the center of it, inviting all of us to remember the stories that freedom is a coming and freedom is ours.

And so we together remember that even when it feels like the story is ending, as it felt for the Israelites at the beginning of the book of Exodus, that it's not the end of the story. The story continues.

And oh, hey, by the way, when it gets really hard and you don't feel like you have any water or bread, we remember Exodus again. Not to judge them, but to remember that they're human like us and that God shows up.

And oh, hey, by the way, if you're really at the end of your rope and you get to the point where the folks coming against you are going to keep coming, then we remember we hold up our hands in surrender, but then we hold up one another.

We hold up each other's arms through the longest night, remembering that the banner over all of us is the banner of God's love.

Some of you may have read this week on our Facebook page, a beautiful poem that



comes from our very own organic Bob who also cleans up Easter egg messes. And I wanted to share this poem with you in case you hadn't had the opportunity to read it, because I think it reminds us so much of the invitation and the remembrance that the Israelites got to remember every time they heard this passage. It's called "Into the Dark."

Into the dark with you I will go and I will wake when you call in the cold dark hours. As you weep I will hold you, silent, timeless, as you may need. As bitter waves break upon your heart, I will stand in the water steady for you. The smiles that come between floods of pain, I will share. When rage foams and spouts, I feel that anger too. Questions hurled at a silent God will issue from my lips as well. When you need to grieve alone, I will wait by the lone tree upon the dark shore until you return. As you heal and walk again, I will let you go. You may find me at any time by the lone tree on that sunny shore in case you need me more.

Sometimes it hurts to be human. Yet as the story of Exodus reminds us, the story of God's work of freedom for all of us as a people is a story that God keeps working out with us. And when we forget, we have these stories that can remind us God isn't done with us yet. And the trajectory of every story and fundamentally all of God's story is one of freedom. And when we really forget, we are reminded here in Exodus...that's ok for we need each other to keep our hands raised in surrender.

And sometimes admitting that we need each other is one of the most terrifying things we can do, right? I'm aware of this...now I have to admit that I need you too? Come on people. God must not have meant that part, right? Probably not. Or maybe. So in those moments, when you find your hands upraised but falling, or when we know that each other are in those spaces of hurt or pain, let's be a people who continue to grab each other's hands and hold them up, for though the mourning lasts for the night, rejoicing comes in the morning. That is the promise. And that is the story that God has been writing since the beginning. And we remember, with Israel, that we are not a people forsaken or forlorn, no- we are a people whose God is the banner of love.

May this kingdom come, may this will be done, in the midst of the beauty and frailty of our lives. Let's hold up each other's arm. Amen.

Scripture: Joshua 1:1-11 (NRSV)

1 After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying, 2 "My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites. 3 Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses. 4 From the wilderness and the Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, to the Great Sea in the west shall be your territory. 5 No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. 6 Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. 7 Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. 8 This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. 9 I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

10 Then Joshua commanded the officers of the people, 11 "Pass through the camp, and command the people: 'Prepare your provisions; for in three days you are to cross over the Jordan, to go in to take possession of the land that the Lord your God gives you to possess.'"

Sermon: "New Land"

(Looking up at the “Jesus balloon utilized during the Life App that was in the air above the pulpit): Well, I feel like on this Ascension Sunday that Jesus is especially close! Hi Jesus (waves)!

Well, Good Morning! Or, Bonjour! (as I just returned from France) And therein ends my knowledge of French!

It's good to see you all this morning, and it's good to be back with you. This morning, throughout the sermon I'm going to be reading and pausing to reflect upon a benediction that Nadia Bolz-Weber shared yesterday at the funeral of Christian thinker, writer, and blogger Rachel Held Evans... who was born the same year I was and died in May. As you hear these moments of benediction in the midst of this invitation into "new lands", may they be moments for prayerful reflection-- for breathing in, and for contemplation.¹

Let us continue in prayer and listening for God's invitations together.

From Nadia Bolz-Weber: "Blessed are the agnostics. Blessed are they who doubt. Blessed are those who have nothing to offer. Blessed are the preschoolers who cut in line at communion. Blessed (indeed) are the poor in spirit. You are of heaven, and Jesus blesses you."

Amen, number one.

New Land. Marie's sermon from last week invited us to ask what it means to transition...when we are moved from the normal to the surreal, as Lucy's walk through the wardrobe into Narnia. Marie argued that one way this happens, and we see this transpire in the Bible (such as in the book of Mark) is a "zap" of an instant change, where the world is suddenly radically different than it was just moments before. Now, even though we didn't communicate while I was in Paris, I came back rather pleasantly surprised to observe how God's Spirit works, because our sermons have a lot of resonance with one another!

Today then I want to both follow with Marie in what she invited us into, and also offer my own reflections on what it looks like to transition into **new lands**. Namely, I want to talk a little bit about *what happens when we actually must figure out how to live into the new lands, and how in these new spaces we all come with complex stories and complex ways we experience the newness.*

¹ Nadia Bolz-Weber, "Benediction," Rachel Grace Held Evans Requiem Eucharist (June 1, 2019). Bulletin available: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/4f63ddf524ac9f2c23f422a4/t/5cf14dfef9a0200001213a84/1559318017238/Funeral_Liturgy_for_Rachel.pdf

And so we come to the book of Joshua, chapter 1.

I mean this is the ultimate new land! The people of Israel had moved from slavery in Egypt with a sense of promise that God had a land and a place for them. And they are about to go into the promised land!

A few weeks ago I had the opportunity to go to Scripture Circles on a Thursday morning and when I was there we talked about some of the Israelite's journey. Vicki Bliese, along with others such as Mary and Jim Fisher, who have actually been to Israel know more about the landscape along the Jordan River than I do noted how interesting it is that on one side of the Jordan River looks a lot like the Jordan River on the other side.

Now just imagine...you've been wandering around in the desert and are like: "Ok, we've been wandering around the desert..." You get to the other side and you think: "Really, this is it?!" "Milk and Honey?? I think it's the same on the other side of this river!"

And yet, everything has changed.

On April 14th, Rachel Held Evans posted her final tweets. She wrote this: "If you're the praying type--I'm in the hospital with the flu + UTI combo and severe allergic reaction to the antibiotics they gave me (I'm totally going to miss G(ame) O(f) T(hrones) (sad face)!)"²

On May 4th she died.

For Dan, her spouse, for her two kids, for those who knew and loved her, everything had changed. And yet, life goes on. Yet things still keep on bustling and movement continues to happen.

You're on the other side of the river...and it looks the same...and yet it's totally different.

² Rachel Held Evans, Final Twitter Posts (April 14, 2019). Accessible: <https://twitter.com/rachelheldevans/status/1117426946210705409>.

Have you ever had an experience like this? Where in an instant everything changes, and yet, in some ways so much looks the same. 634

And how do you reorient to this new reality? What does this look like?

Maybe the world has changed and you don't know yet how to live into this space. Maybe for you, it's something like I think of the story of Marie Antoinette and the last rulers of France where the world had actually already changed, but they couldn't believe it so it wasn't until the doors of Versailles were broken down that they finally had to face the reality that the world had already changed and revolution was at hand.

In an instant where everything changes and yet it looks the same.

As I was wandering around Paris I thought of you all (well, a little bit...I mean, not all of the time!). I was thinking about this sermon and about living into this new land of our core values. In a way, a lot changed. And in a way, a lot looks the same.

But that's the thing about new lands: you cross the river and even though things have changed, *you don't get to see the change until you go further in.*

That's because to live in a new land demands that you have to go further in.

Again, from Nadia Bolz-Weber "Blessed are those whom no one else notices. The kids who sit alone at middle-school lunch tables. The laundry guys at the hospital. The sex workers and the night-shift street sweepers. The closeted. The teens who have to figure out ways to hide the new cuts on their arms. Blessed are the meek. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you."

So to live into the new land, we have to go further in. This is not the faith of "fake it until you make it." No. This is the faith instead that says: **"Live it until you believe it."**

This is why for me one of my favorite parts of the Bible is I John 4 where it says (with apologies to those who've already heard me reference this passage 20 times this past year): "Perfecting love drives out fear."

I used to think that this meant “**perfect** love drives out fear.” As in: “Get the 635 message and get on with it, Sara!” But no, the Greek verb is a little bit more generous...it’s a *perfecting love*. One that reminds us that it’s only as we *live into love* that heals and transforms us and saves us...only then that we actually know what it *feels like* in our bones.

When you go into new land everything is new and uncertain and you don’t know how to navigate, because it’s only by living into it that we can even possibly begin to know what this new land is.

Some of you know that part of why I was in Paris was because this summer Andy and I will have been married for ten years. Especially in the first years of our relationship, I kept on waiting for the other shoe to drop. Like he was so nice that I was sure he’d wake up one day and realize that I was kind of a handful!

But little bit by little bit over time, as I’ve lived into the newness of life with Andy, I’ve discovered more deeply what it means to live into a perfecting love-one that drives out fear.

You live it until you believe it by going further in. Further into the new land.

And it’s normal to be afraid and uncertain and feeling like: “Can’t we just please go back?!”

The Israelites knew this too.

Remember? They sent out scouts. They knew there were giants in the land. They knew there were reasons to be afraid. That’s maybe why the command “Do not be afraid,” appears so many times in these first verses of the book of Joshua and throughout the book...because *it’s totally human to be afraid. It’s totally human to want to go back.*

Dennis Olson, in his commentary on this book notes:

Throughout Scripture, God proclaims to God’s people, “Do not fear ... “I will be with you!” The list is long: Abraham (Genesis 15:1), Hagar (Genesis 21:17), Jacob (Genesis 27:41; 28:13-15), Moses (Exodus 3:11), fleeing Israelite slaves (Exodus 14:10, 13), the judge Gideon (Judges 6:14-16), King

Hezekiah (2 Kings 19:5-7), the psalmist beset by powerful enemies 636 (Psalm 118:6), the community of Jewish exiles (Isaiah 41:10; 43:5), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:8), Daniel (Daniel 10:12, 19), Mary (Luke 1:30), shepherds surrounded by angels (Luke 2:8-14), disciples caught in a storm (Mark 4:37-40), frightened disciples in the night of Jesus 'betrayal (John 14:27), disciples frightened by reports of a resurrected Jesus (Mark 16:8; Matthew 28:10, 18-20), the apostle Paul (Acts 18:9-10; 27:24; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10), or John of Patmos (Revelation 1:17-18).³

You get the point? (I know, you're like: "Please stop, Sara!") "This large cloud of witnesses," he writes, "testifies that following God's call into a new venture can often stir up fear in our hearts." This is why God in God's wonderful graciousness reminds us to not be afraid, for the I AM is with you.

This is the promise of resurrection that Marie spoke about last week. That life comes out of death and sometimes it's only through these losses that life continues.

You might feel like the world is ending, but Joshua challenges us to **go further in.**

You might feel like the world is confusing...**go further in.**

You might feel like us crazy millennials have faith that you don't understand...**go further in.**

Because you only get to taste the milk and honey if you cross over the waters and keep on going further in, my friends.

From Nadia Bolz-Weber, again: "Blessed are they who have loved enough to know what loss feels like. Blessed are the mothers of the miscarried. Blessed are they who can't fall apart because they have to keep it together for everyone else. Blessed are those who "still aren't over it yet." Blessed are those who mourn. You are of heaven and Jesus blesses you."

³ Dennis Olson, "Commentary on Joshua 3:7-17," *Working Preacher* (Accessed on May 29, 2019): https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3456.

That's why for me for the first time this past week when I re-read the exodus narrative of the 40 years in the wilderness I read it not as punishment, but thought "What if it's just an acknowledgement of the human condition? That the Israelites needed 40 years because the transition was hard and painful and they had some stuff they had to work out in the desert?"

Sometimes we too also need time. And time is something that God graciously gives us.

And sometimes when we read this passage we think that the Israelites marched into the promised land and triumphantly (and genocidely) took over the land, yet the reality and archeological evidence suggests that this isn't what happened. They went into the land, indeed, but they were a small, rag-tag group of people who were trying to figure out how to live into the promise, reminding themselves of stories, like they do here in Joshua: "Hey folks, don't forget, God's been with you and will be." And it helps them to remember and continue living into the land.

They, like all of us, or at least some of us, forget things. And Joshua serves as a reminder in the midst of the journey that God is the God who will continue to show up, helping us to breathe, to trust, to risk again... even when we have nothing left and are terrified.

Because living in this land and going further in takes time.

From Nadia Bolz-Weber: "I imagine Jesus standing here blessing us because that is our Lord's nature. This Jesus cried at his friend's tomb, turned the other cheek, and forgave those who hung him on a cross. He was God's Beatitude—God's blessing to the weak in a world that admires only the strong."

One of the things that I love about the Bible is how the stories that Jesus lived are connected to the stories that he and his people knew. Jesus, in so many ways throughout the gospels, is represented as the *new Moses*. We see this at the beginning of Joshua where Moses has died and now Joshua is bringing them into the new land. Moses was known as the "Servant of God"-- the one who directly spoke with God. He led the people for 40 years from slavery to

freedom through the desert. Jesus, likewise, wandered around the desert for⁶³⁸ 40 days and led people into the truest way of being. This suffering servant, Jesus, is our Moses who ascends up (to ceilings as is the case with our balloon Jesus today) and sends the Spirit as our Joshua to help us to live into new land.

That the Spirit is with us is part of the promise of Ascension Sunday; that as we go into this new land, as we live into it with trepidation and fear, in view of the complexities of how we got here, the grief and the pain like the Israelites themselves carried, Jesus as the “new Moses” invites and ushers us further into the truest, fullest promised land.

Janet Hagberg shared with us at the Women’s Retreat about a way that God had been showing up and speaking into her life through the image of a Carousel: “All is well, carousel.” This image evokes a picture of God at the center, holding all things, so that no matter what happens, even as our animals go up and down, we can trust that the center holds.

Now, I happen to love this image because I *still* love carousels. I’ve loved them since I was a little girl, and this last week I got to go on one with Andy in Paris, right under the Eiffel Tower. And if you were to see the video of us doing this you would see me at top joy fever pitch. Because the carousel is a remembrance that no matter what happens that God holds the center and as we continue to ride on this journey we have the gift of the Spirit and her gifts of boldness, wisdom, language, and unity (as Marie pointed out earlier during the life app).

We have the Spirit who invites us deeper into this new, truly promised land.

The final offering from Nadia Bolz-Weber: “Jesus invites us into a story bigger than ourselves and our imaginations, yet we all get to tell that story with the scandalous particularity of this moment and this place. We are storytelling creatures because we are fashioned in the image of a storytelling God. May we never neglect that gift. May we never lose our love for telling the story.”

So, our charge? Our charge is to be a people who live the story of the new land and the Gospel promise. People who pack food and pack supplies, who seek to be together in helping one another to be strong. To live into the land that God is giving us and is already ours. And in this we are invited to have

grace for one another *in our fears*, to have love for one another *in our uncertainty*, and to encourage one another when the land looks exactly the same and we're not sure if the change is coming, or if we want it.

So let's live that promise.

"Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."

Let us never lose our love for living and telling the story of God's promise and resurrection as we go further in to the new land.

To Rachel Held Evans and all who labor and live a story of Gospel promise of love for all. We say thanks and amen.

AMEN.

A LITANY FOR FATHER'S DAY

To you who have nurtured us, who have lived so that we might flourish and find life.

To you who have cared for our becoming, who have given of yourself to make our futures possible.

To you, our fathers, who co-labored us into being.

To you, our fathers, who adopted us as your own.

To you, our fathers by choice, who by your embodied action have loved all who have come into your life.

Congregation: We see you. We honor you. May God's rich love surround you this day.

To you who know the pain of longing...

Who desired to be called father, but have never known that name.

Who have loved your children from afar.

Who have felt helpless to connect or felt themselves unworthy to know the name *Dad*.

Who long for the homecoming of a child who has chosen a pathway of pain.

Who are broken over the absence of a father who was or is unable to love you as you are.

Who yearn for the day when you will see your father again, whether you are separated now by death or by a broken relationship.

Congregation: We see you. We honor you. May God's rich love hold you this day.

To you who have lost...

To you who have lost children and ache with grief:

whether before they were able to breathe outside of the womb,

whether your child left this earth too soon,

OR whether the loss is fraught with the ache of absence in the midst of their still being here on earth.

Congregation: We see you. We honor you. May God's rich love comfort you this day.
To you...our fathers.

Our uncles

Our neighbors

Our grandfathers

Our teachers

Our leaders

Our healers

Our friends.

To you who fight

and nurture.

Who love

and pray.

To your beauty

To your complexity

To your vulnerability

and your power.

To your belovedness as ones made in the image of a loving God

In the midst of your pain and brokenness...

Longing for your joy and healing and wholeness.

Congregation: We see you. We honor you. May God's rich love be yours this day.

To you who were taught that boys don't cry...may the love of the Jesus who wept invite you into the heart of love and heal your scars.

To you who were taught to fear and fight and strive...may the love of Christ teach you the beauty of community that welcomes you back even when you have denied Christ three times.

To you whom we have refused to let be broken and vulnerable, may the Spirit breathe in and on you, bringing life into your bones to make you whole and human so that you might rise into the fullness of God's image in you, discovering the gospel truth and promise: that it is through death that we discover life abundant and free...the hidden life that is yours already.

Congregation: We see you. We honor you. May God's rich love surround you this day.

To our first father, Adam. To Joseph, who was the father of Jesus in the world.

To the men of our faith. To Abraham and Isaac. To Jacob and Esau. To Joseph and Moses. To Joshua. To men of prophetic truth like Nathan. To men of great love like Sampson. To men of great trust like Josiah. To Simeon and John the Baptist. To Saul and men whose eyes have been opened. To Peter who laid down his sword. To Timothy and the Ethiopian Eunuch. To men who changed their minds, who gave their lives, who laid everything on the line for a kingdom not of this world but of heaven.

To the men named and unnamed in Scripture, in our lives, and in our collective story.

Congregation: We see you. We honor you. We give God thanks for your life and legacy.

To the Sudanese father, to the grandfather in Columbia, to the father in North Korea, in Cambodia, in Congo, in Somalia, in the UAE, in North Minneapolis, in South Dakota, and in Iran. To fathers throughout history and all around the world who labor with them for the conditions of peace and the possibility of human flourishing.

To the fathers whose children will never return from war.

To those who seek to father us well even though they live with the legacy of trauma and war in their own lives.

To the fathers who face death to secure their children safe passage.

To those who have been unjustly imprisoned and have been rendered powerless to care for their family as they desire.

To the enslaved, the immigrant, the widower, and the refugee.

To the fathers who give their lives trying to make the world better for future generations.

Congregation: We see you. We honor you. May God's rich love surround and uphold you this day.

And to you, oh God and Father of us all. (I Corinthians 8:6)

To you, the one who has fashioned all humanity in your image. (Gen 1:27)

To you, the God who brought us into being through your love; who abides in us as we abide in you. (I John 4, Deuteronomy 32:18, John 3:16)

To you, the one who teaches us to walk, feeds us, and leads us in kindness. (Hosea 11:3-4)

To you, the God to whom we can cry "*Abba*," without fear, but trusting that you hear us. You who has adopted us as your own, who calls us your children. (Galatians 4:4-7, I John 3:1-3, John 1:12, Romans 8:15, John 1:12-14)

To you, the God and Father of all comfort who has compassion on us like a father for his children. (Psalm 103:13, Isaiah 66:13, 2 Cor. 1)

To you, oh God who reminds us of your care for us through your care for all creation. (Matthew 6:26 and Matthew 10:29-31)

To you, the God, who has looked for us as the father for his son who was lost, longing for his and our homecoming. (Luke 11:15-32)

To you, the Father of lights, who delights in giving us all good things that the kingdom brings (Luke 12:32, James 1:17)

To you, the Father of orphans and the protector of widows, who calls us to do the same. (Psalm 68:5 and 10:14, Deuteronomy 10:18, James 1:27)

To you, who rejoices when we come home again and/or re-remember the love and blessing that has always been ours. May we find you anew this day of celebration as you exclaim, with arms wide open, the words you have breathed on us since the beginning of time:

Congregation: "Welcome home, beloved."

To you we run, to you we offer our hearts and lives. To you we give thanks, oh God and Father of all of us, praying in the vein that Christ, your son, has taught us:

Our Mother/Father, who art in heaven.

Hallowed be your name

Your kingdom come

Your will be done

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On earth as it is in heaven

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

And lead us not into temptation,

But deliver us from evil

For thine is the kindom**

And the power

And the glory.

Now and forever.

Amen.

*Note: I wrote this litany in conversation with the litany I wrote last year for Mother's Day, which you can read [here](#).

**"Kindom" is the language I first learned from Dr. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, and it opened up to me a new way of understanding what God, in Christ, invites us to: the new way of being human isn't actually a kingdom but truly a kin-dom where we are all returned to the right relationship with God, the earth, ourselves, and one another. The kin-dom of God is fundamentally the place of peace and shalom where we are all known and loved as God's beloved ones.



“I am the Light of the World”

John 8:12-20

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” Then the Pharisees said to him, “You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid.” Jesus answered, “Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. You judge by human standards; I judge no one. Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is valid; for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me. In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf.” Then they said to him, “Where is your Father?” Jesus answered, “You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.” He spoke these words while he was teaching in the treasury of the temple, but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come.

- John 8:12-20

Will you pray with me?

Oh, light of the world, fill our hearts and minds and souls and lives that we might be people who walk in your light. Amen.

+++++

Well, good morning. It’s good to see you all on this very lovely week when we celebrate the independence of the United States of America. I’m so glad to be here with you this morning. As I was working on this sermon and sitting with this passage this week, I kept thinking about a lot of different songs. Those of you who know me at all know that music is my jam—meaning that I like it a lot. So it might come as no surprise to you that this love goes way back. One of my memories from growing up is when I was in middle school at a youth retreat and heard a song from a new album by a Christian band called DC Talk. The song went: “I want to be in the light as you are in the light, like the stars in the heavens.”¹

I loved that song. I remember listening to the on my Sony Walkman, belting out, “I want to be in that is you are in the light. I want to shine like the stars in the heavens.” I loved the song and with all of my heart I wanted those words to be true of my life.

And the reality is that sometimes those words feel that true, those times when you

¹ DC Talk, “I Wanna Be in the Light,” *Jesus Freak* (Nashville: ForeFront Records, 1995).



lift up your hands and say, "I want to be in the light." And light feels like life, and light feels like the things that make your soul sing, your body dance, or you tap along a little bit if you're not into dancing.

But sometimes, being in the light is actually really uncomfortable. Sometimes, light is painful, and sometimes light exposes stuff that some of us—myself included—might have spent our lifetime trying to make sure it will never see the light of day. Right?

And so today, in our second week of the "I am" summer series, we come to this passage in the book of John where Jesus says, "I am the light of the world." And today, we're going to explore what it means when Jesus says, "I am the light of the world," in terms of the depth and power of what Jesus is saying and what John is claiming here, and then connect that to our own lives and the beauty and the struggle of what it means to be a people of the light who follow the Jesus who said, "I am the light of the world."

So, a little bit of context to begin. For some of you, when you've heard this passage, it may remind you of some passages in the Jewish scriptures, going back indeed to Genesis 15:1 where we see the first "I AM" statement. "I AM" is said over 300 times throughout the Bible, so much so that the biblical God is often called the "Great I AM." Indeed, in Hebrew, one of the names for God, YHWH, is connected to the Hebrew verb which means *to be* or *I am*. Thus, when Moses encounters God in the burning bush and says, "Who should I say sent me?" God responds, "I AM that I AM." I am. Paul Tillich, a theologian, excavates this notion of God as the I AM and writes about God as the ground of being, meaning like God is the one who holds and sustains us; the one in whom we breathe and have life. God is I AM. The I AM has sent you, Moses.²

So here in John, he is inviting the Christian community into making a deep connection between Jesus and the biblical texts that had preceded Jesus, wherein the Jewish people would know God as the I AM. In so doing, John is arguing that Jesus is God. "The I am has sent you. The I am is now me. Jesus." This connection would have not been lost on the hearers of this repeating theme of Jesus as the "I AM" throughout the gospel. Historically, the Jewish people had been a people who said, "The Lord, your God, the Lord is one." Now along comes Christians who were claiming that Jesus was also God. And the Jewish leadership was like, "You're not monotheistic anymore, folks. You got multiple gods if you claim Jesus is divine and equal with YHWH, the Great I AM."

So John's gospel takes the story of the people of God, and connects it to the story of Jesus, claiming that he is the I AM. "Boom. You don't mess with the I AM. I AM. Those two words are telling us an important thing about who Jesus is and is meant to be both in our lives and in the world and in the church. And in this particular passage that we read for today in John chapter eight it, "I AM the light of the world."

² Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, reprint ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).



The theme of light and darkness is also totally present throughout scripture. If we return to Genesis one, there's light and darkness. There are many texts that name God as light. This makes me think of another song: "Lord, you're leading me with a cloud by day. And then in the night, the glow of a burning flame."³

For Israel, God is the flame of light that led them through the desert. The beam of God's presence is the light that guides them. Or in the Psalms we read, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light for my path." Thankfully, I don't know the song for that one. Just kidding, I actually do: as Amy Grant sang... "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path."⁴ I might have a problem... or a really wonderful skill, right?

This theme of light is an important symbol throughout scripture, arguing that where there is light, there is the presence of God. For the light shows us that God leads, God is with God's people, and we indeed are not alone.

Now, way back in the day when I was in seminary I wrote a paper on the theme of light in the book of John, tracing the theme of light through the book:

John 1:4-5, 7-8 "in him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it...He (John) came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."

John 3:2 "(Nicodemus) came to Jesus by night."

John 3:19-21 "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil for all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done by God."

John 5:35 "He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light."

John 6:16-17 "When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them."

John 8:12 "Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.'"

³ Rich Mullins, "I See You," *Songs 2* (Brentwood, TN: Reunion Records, 1999).

⁴ Amy Grant, "Thy Word," *The Collection* (Nashville: Myrrh, 1986).



John 9:4-5 “We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day. Night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

John 11:9-10 “Jesus answered, ‘Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.’”

John 12:35-36 “Jesus said to them, ‘The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.’”

John 12:46 “I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness.”

John 13:30 “So, after receiving the piece of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.”

John 19:39 “Nicodemus, who had first come to Jesus by night...”

John 20:1 “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark...”

John 20:19 “When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week...”

John 21:3-4 “They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just after daybreak...”

One of the beautiful things that John does in his gospel is he makes a lot of contrasting dualisms in the book: Light and dark, flesh and spirit, and so on. These sorts of themes are present throughout the book of John. So a fun study you could do is pick one of these dualisms such as darkness and light, go through the book of John, and pay attention to where light and dark shows up in the text so as to notice what he is saying about light and darkness.

Beginning of the book of John, we start here where it says, “In him was life.” So the connection of that life and light, the light, the light, the light. Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. And then later in that same passage Jesus is called the light of the world. So you see that throughout the book. These are my comments afterwards, you can ignore those. The yellow is all the times that light appears, and it continues to appear repeatedly up until John 12, because John is building the case that Jesus is the light of the world. That keeps going and going and the theme of light is present throughout the entirety of the book of John. And by continually referring to the light, John is making the case that not only is Jesus the I AM, at Jesus is the light of the world. It’s like a double whammy of saying Jesus is, indeed, God and God with us.

Throughout the early days of the church they continued to wrestle with how to make



sense of Jesus. At their gatherings and councils up until the Council of Chalcedon, the church wrestled heavily with who Jesus is. And here in the book of John, we have a clear picture of John saying, "Hey folks, Jesus is God. And Jesus is the light of life." That indeed is another important and beautiful part of the connection in John that light and life go together. When we move out of darkness, as John tells us, a story about Jesus, we move into God's glorious light. We experience the freedom and the life that is possible in Christ.

So we come to this passage here for today in John chapter eight. It's on page 104 of your Pew Bibles. Just to give you a little bit more context of what's going on: the earliest versions of the book of John that we have, many of them exclude the story at the beginning of chapter eight of the woman who was caught in adultery...though that would be interesting, we can talk more about that on another day.

If we go back then to chapter seven and skip to verse 12 which Pete read for us, what's happening right before this is that they ask and they say to Jesus, this is verse 52 of chapter seven. "Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee." So what's happening right now in the book of John and the conversation between the Pharisees and Jesus is that they indeed are saying basically, "Who do you think you are?" And so we come then to John 8:12 and Jesus answers them by saying, "I am the light of the world." I don't think they liked that very much, because indeed they were well versed in the scriptures, and by saying this and claiming to be both the I AM and the LIGHT, Jesus is claiming divinity. This continues throughout the entire chapter of chapter eight. This question of who you are, and Jesus has dialoguing back and forth with them throughout the chapter.

As we continue through the chapter, we see Jesus talking about himself as the light of the world, about if you follow my teaching, you are my disciples, and the truth you shall know when it will set you free. And he ends at the very end of this chapter, Jesus says to them, "Very truly I tell you before Abraham was, I AM." So this entire chapter is making a case for Jesus being connected to YHWH. As Jesus says, "I AM the one who was sent, the one who was to come. I AM the light of the world. And as you walk in that light, the truth will set you free." Now, the Pharisees can hardly bear this teaching. And I'll admit that often when I've read this passage, I've thought to myself, "Man, what's wrong with them? It's Jesus. They should totally get it."

I usually associate myself with the hero line of any story. And as it turns out, I'm not always the hero of the story. And the invitation of the light of Christ is a reminder to walk in the remembrance that none of us have to be heroes who understand or get everything in order to walk into grace and embrace and be embraced by the light. For indeed, some of you and your own lives have known what it has felt like to have light encounter you in a place of shame and darkness. And it has felt glorious and freeing, right? Maybe it was the first moment when you chose to show up at an AA meeting and said, "This is my name...And I have a problem." Maybe it was at a retreat or an experience where you raised your hands in surrender and said, "I don't have to hide in shame anymore." Maybe it was a secret that you had been keeping for years,



and you've known the beauty of what the freedom has felt like when you finally spoke the truth.

Sometimes light feels like life immediately. But sometimes light doesn't feel that way. Sometimes I want to talk to owners of clothing shops and say, "Do you want us to not buy your clothing?" Because if you've ever been to a shop and tried on clothes you know what I'm talking about—where the light in the dressing rooms is so terrible and you look in the mirror and think, "I don't look this bad, I think, right?!" It's because the light is harsh and terrible. And sometimes the light of life is actually like that-- sometimes light is really painful in what it exposes about us. Just like sometimes when a beloved friend points out something that hurt them, it's soul crushing. Sometimes when you feel like all your business got put out on the street you think: "Can I please go find something to hide under?" Sometimes the light of truth is excruciating. Sometimes being in the light means you feel exposed, ashamed, and alone. Sometimes light exposes things that feel like they will destroy us.

It's normal human psychology and ego protection to want to hide those parts, to want to stay safe. It's normal to be afraid of the light. But here's the thing...this news...that Jesus is the light is actually good news. And here, in John the I AM of Jesus is connected to the verb in Greek from which we get "ego." Jesus is the I AM, the one whose light, in what it exposes, opens up a space for us to not have to live in self-protection, to not have to try to fend off from each other what we're so sure might destroy us if the light came in. Because if God really is the I AM who holds us and sustains us, which we affirm, right? Right? Would be the right answer. Right? If the I AM is the one who holds and sustains us, if the light of truth is the light of the gospel of grace, then nothing which is exposed cannot be healed and taken up. Walking into the light can sometimes be painful, but it is always the truest moment of life and life everlasting. The exposure of the light is the way to true life where we refuse ego protection, and find ourselves held and sustained by the fire of the GREAT I AM whose light and life doesn't burn up the bush or destroy it, but calls us to take off our shoes and walk on this sacred ground.

Some of you know that this past week my former church was kicked out of their denomination. It was a painful week for many connected to the Evangelical Covenant Church. And it was a time where people were wrestling with what it means to live in the light and to discern the truth. Sometimes taking that journey can be painful. Sometimes walking into deeper truth means having to admit things that we don't want to admit.⁵

Last week, Andy and I watched *The Heart of Gold*, a HBO documentary on the coverup inside of the United States Gymnastic Association related to Larry Nassar's abuse of over 300 young girls under his care. As I watched it, I didn't just think about Larry Nassar. I thought about myself...how in my thirst and quest for the USA to win

⁵ See, for instance: Yonat Shimron, "Evangelical Denomination Expels Congregation Over LGBT Policy," *Religion News Service* (June 28, 2019), accessed online at: <https://religionnews.com/2019/06/28/in-a-first-evangelical-covenant-church-expels-minneapolis-congregation/>.



the gold at the Olympics to, back in late eighties and early nineties, to win against the USSR and the Romanians...I never stopped to think about the cost.⁶ I never stopped to ask questions about who might get harmed in the pursuit of gold. And watching that documentary reminded me that sometimes having to walk in the light and telling true stories about who we are, about our families, about our gymnastics teams can be painful.

But the Great I AM holds us, and we don't have to be afraid. For wherever there is light, there is healing, there is acceptance for all of who we are in the light of Christ's grace and love. And this week as we celebrate Independence Day, it's a time where the word freedom ought to mean something special to us. And indeed, we proclaim and affirm a gospel of freedom. And when Jesus says, "I AM the light of the world," he is calling to us to be a people who are free. A people who are healed, a people whose wounds get bound up. A people who sometimes come with our arms open, singing the song, "I want to be in the light!" And sometimes are like, "I want to be in the light, maybe tomorrow." And sometimes just run away, plugging our ears to the call to walk in the light.

The other gospels that speaks about light is Matthew. You may remember the passage where it says, " "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.." (Matthew 5:14) And that's the people we are indeed invited and called to be. A people who, as a church, are a place where light dispels shame, where the Great I AM holds and sustains us. And where the one who is the light of the world through the healing work of God's Spirit allows us to be the people of the light.

Walking into the light can be scary. And whether you come with open hands, dancing; whether you come with fists clenched; or whether you come unwillingly, may the God of all comfort whose Spirit is a Spirit of truth and life and light breathe on all of us, inviting us to be a people who can sing and with our whole beings proclaim, "I want to be in the light as you are the light. I want to shine like the stars in the heavens. Oh Lord, be my light and be my salvation. All I want is to be in the light."

Let us walk in the light as he is in the light, and let us shine the light so that even sometimes when our lives feel dark, we remember we are not alone for the light of the Great I AM will lead and guide and heal us now and always.

Amen.

⁶ Erin Lee Carr, At the *Heart of Gold* (New York: HBO, 2019).



And Jesus Said “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life”

John 14:1-7

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in me, in my father's house, there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself so that where I am, there you may be also.

"And you know the way to the place where I am going?"

Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

Jesus said to him, "I am the way and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father, except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on, you do know Him and have seen Him."

- John 14:1-7

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Well, good morning. Will you pray with me?

God of all wild and precious life, God who has fashioned grasshoppers and each of us, give us the strength and the love to walk in the way as we all indeed do walk each other home.

Amen.

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So as I was working on this sermon, I was trying to figure out how to fit an analogy from the recent Twins' sad series against the New York Yankees that I could work into the sermon...

I tried really hard because I was at the game on Tuesday night and my dad was visiting. Now, I try to be a good Christian in most areas of my life. I'm like, "God loves everyone and made everyone..." but when it comes to the Twins versus the Yankees,



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I read passages like one from John, where it notes that there are many rooms in God's house, and I think, "Maybe the Yankees get a different part of the house though, right?" My apologies...this is why we all have to come to church because God has to work on me, too, right?!

I'm glad to be with you this morning! A couple of weeks ago, I was up north at the cabin, working on my dissertation, and Jeff sent me a note to make sure I was actually working on my dissertation and not just riding the pontoon, which of course I was doing some of both, but I wanted to share a bit about my dissertation with you this morning.

I wanted to do so because while I was up north and working on the dissertation, I was also writing this sermon at the same time, thinking about, and being grateful for this opportunity to re-articulate for myself what it means when Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." I'm grateful for the opportunity this afforded me to think, to pause and to ask, "Where am I at right now? What do I believe about this?"

And so today as I share with you what my "right now" is, I want to invite each of us to consider these questions: Where are you at right now? How would you answer what it means when Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life?"

Before I answer that for myself, let me tell you a little bit about how I grew up thinking about this passage. There are three major ways that I've historically heard folks talk about Jesus saying, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." One of them is that it is central to an affirmation of the way of faith where one is "born again." You believe in Jesus, you confess that, and then you're in, right? You're a Christian. I'm not saying this is untrue, just that as I heard it while growing up I learned that this passage was one of the central affirmations of Jesus being the way and that one should follow it.

A second way I remember hearing this passage talked about was that it was biblical proof that Christianity was the only way. Thus, when I was in junior high, I told my friend that if you didn't believe in Jesus then you were going to go to hell...and this passage proved it.

A third way I learned to make sense of this passage was that I internalized that if Jesus was the way, the truth, and the life, that there was one way that must be the right way in all things. I thought that if I could just figure out what exactly the way, the truth, and the life was, then I could get it all down and with clenched fists be like, "I got it!" I would be the right kind of Christian. No, there's some of you who are like "Sara, I've never thought of any of those three things." Well, now you know what was going on inside of my brain and it will help you to clarify what's been going on inside of your brain and heart as you come to this passage.

Today, I want to suggest another way to think about this passage, connected with our sermon series on the "I AM" statements of Jesus recorded in the book of John.



And I want to do this in conversation with my dissertation.

My dissertation's working title is *Dangerous Memories: Sexual Violence and Trauma Towards a Feminist, Political, Theological Ethics of Memory*. My dissertation picks up a tradition inside of Christian theology that was birthed in the ashes of the Shoah, the Holocaust, as Christians were wrestling with what it means to dare to say the name of Jesus in view of the suffering and the violence in our world. They sought to re-articulate a Christian faith in view of the way that Christianity was complicit in the rise of National Socialism, they wrestled with what it means to be a people who say, "We are Christians," in their time. Additionally, many theologians were wrestling with the rise of secularization in, to use Dietrich Bonhoeffer's language, "a world that has come of age."¹ They were struggling with what it meant to be church, to gather, and to even bother doing the life of faith together.

Some of those questions, while not the exact same ones as for us today, are ones that I think we are wrestling with as a country and as a people. We've heard again, the rise of the nones and just last week on public radio, I heard a pastor interviewed saying that the reason people don't go to church is because they don't believe, or they've lost their moral fabric. For me, that answer isn't sufficient. I'm less interested in those sorts of explanations which blame people who aren't sitting in church and more interested in asking, who are we called to be? The church has persevered throughout thousands of years and we say that we are invited to be a people of the way. So what does it mean to do and to say that we are people who follow The Way?²

Dietrich Bonhoeffer has been one of my favorite conversation partners on this question for many years. He talks about the ways in which Christianity in his time was operating. He writes that some of the ways Christians have articulated what it means to follow Jesus have been so often just been about ourselves and so few of the questions we are asking or answering actually speak to our world. He writes:

What reconciliation and redemption mean, rebirth and Holy Spirit, love for one's enemies, cross and resurrection, what it means to live in Christ and follow Christ, all that is so difficult and remote that we hardly dare speak of it anymore. In these words and actions handed down to us, we sense something totally new and revolutionary, but we cannot yet grasp it and express it. This is our own fault. Our church has been fighting during these years only for its self-preservation, as if that were an end in itself. It has become incapable of bringing the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and to the world. So the words we used before must lose their power, be silenced, and we can be Christians today only in two ways, through prayer and in doing justice among human beings. All Christian thinking, talking, and organizing must be

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 482.

² For more see: https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/?utm_source=link_news9&utm_campaign=item_267920&utm_medium=copy



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born anew, out of that prayer and action.³

I know it might sound outrageous to say that, but it isn't it, after all, fundamentally biblical to indeed argue that it's not just about the question of saving our souls? Isn't this fundamentally biblical? Isn't it true in the old Testament that God's righteousness and kingdom is at the center of everything?

So he wrestles with what it means if we would actually put God's kingdom at the center of everything in our lives and orient ourselves in that sort of way. He challenges us, as the church, even today, that the way to be church in "a world that has come of age" is to be the type of people who are for others, who live into and embrace a faith that challenges us not to be some sort of strong actors who live as if we have all the answers, but to be a people who humbly follow the Jesus who was crucified on a cross.

And yet often, this is actually really hard. It's like losing to the Yankees all the time. How are we to be a church in this world? What does redemption and reconciliation mean? What does the cross and the Holy spirit mean for the way we actually live our lives? Does any of this speak anything to who we are as people in our families, on our streets, in our world? What does it mean to claim to be a people who follow the word made flesh? That's what I want to talk about today.

When Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," I wonder what happens as we move away from ways of living out our faith that claim, "Oh, now I have the answers." Or: "It's sure that I alone have it right." Or: "If only I could figure out exactly what the way was, if I could get it right and live perfectly."

What if instead, we *move more deeply into becoming a people of the way*. Let me say more about this....

What I'm trying to say is that I can read all of the books I want about how to have a good marriage, right? Anyone ever read one? I've read a few of them, but if I don't actually turn towards my spouse and take the risk of relationship, if I'm unwilling to be vulnerable, to admit where I'm wrong, and to let my relationship change and transform and disrupt me, then I'm not really engaging in anything that's going to make our relationship better. I'm just reading books and it's pointless.

Faith, in its own way, is like this. It's an invitation *into* the way. It's an invitation *into* life. It's an invitation to *live* truth, to have it invite and disrupt and heal and change us. That's what Jesus invites us to: a house that is a home for each of us and indeed, all of our siblings throughout the world. The way, the truth, and the life is just that: a way to actually live and we make this way, we know this truth by living it.

One of the other writers that I've been engaging with more recently in my

³ Bonhoeffer, 389.



dissertation is a woman named Dorothee Sölle. Dorothee Sölle was a Lutheran theologian and mystic. Part of what I love about her work tells you something about why I came to this church, for it is a place where head and heart, were living out an active faith, wrestling with hard questions is all a part of who we are.

Sölle talks about how sometimes when we affirm faith as Christians, we relate to God from a position of obedience. The Bible becomes our rule book. God is the Sovereign who tells us all things. And if only we can discern the rules then we can be right and righteous. Sölle counters this relationship of obedience and challenges us that what we hear in the gospels is not that we are servants or subservient, but we are called to be part of the family, to be children who grow up into adulthood.⁴

Being a child of God is a radically different thing than being servants who live our lives saying, "Yes, God. Whatever, God. Sure, God." Obedience fosters a very different relationship than a grownup faith we are actually invited into. Now, sometimes being a grown up is really hard, right? Because when I was a kid, I thought being a grownup was going to be amazing. You got to do whatever you want...you could go to bed whenever you want, and you didn't have anyone telling you anything, right?

Well, I'm a grownup now and as it turns out, I actually don't have as much money as I thought grownups have. And a lot of people tell me what to do. And sometimes being a good grownup is really hard, and sometimes, I want to throw a temper tantrum and not have to take responsibility for my life. Can I get an amen?

I'm going to take your laughs as a sign that at least one or two of you also struggle with being a grownup. The rest of you are not laughing must be better people than the rest of us who relish at Twins' victories over the Yankees.

This is part of the power and the beauty of the gospel, "I am the way, the truth, and the life": it invites us to become grown up, to become children who are actually heirs of this promise, ones who take our rightful place in the house, people who live the promise with our lives. And we do this not because we're going to get in trouble, but because love has seen and transformed us, it's raised us, and now it's the way we live and move and have our very being.

In her writings, Dorothee Sölle talks about the idea of the Shekinah glory and we *have to* talk about this. You see, I don't know if you recall or have been around as we've been talking about the "I AM" statements in the book of John over the summer, but in this series we've outlined how these "I AM" statement connect back to the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, in affirmation of Jesus as God, as the "I

⁴ As she writes: "Mysticism may be regarded as the anti-authoritarian religion per se. In it, the commanding Lord becomes the beloved; what is to come later becomes the now; and naked or even enlightened self-interest that is oriented by reward and punishment becomes mystical freedom." From Dorothee Sölle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2001), 36.



AM.”⁵

Well, in the Hebrew Scriptures, Shekinah Glory was the space of God’s indwelling; God’s presence in the world. So to say, as Christ does, “I’m the way, the truth, and the life,” points to and exemplifies the most profound indwelling of God in our world. The Shekinah Glory of The Great I AM. In Christ, the God of all life has come, and invites us into life, into this way of being.

In the Hebrew Scriptures there’s a sense of when the Shekinah Glory shows up, there’s fear attendant to its appearance. Well, of course there’s fear! Any time that kind of light shows up and makes clear the places where we’re vulnerable, the places where we’re broken, and the places where we need healing, it’s terrifying! But this is indeed the terror that we are called to face to become grown up in view of Christ. To become a people of the way, the truth and the life ourselves is to, as Emilie M. Townes writes:

To be called beloved
is to answer the question
we are not dipped
we are not sprinkled
we are not immersed
we are washed in the grace of God.⁶

We are invited to the dance, à la Richard Rohr, one where we move with the Spirit in the way of love, in the way of truth.⁷

Meister Eckhart, an old school mystic, one said: “God, rid me of God.”⁸ And what he meant by that was: may God remove from us anything that actually keeps us locked in from actually moving into God, towards God, and into the way, the truth, and the life. This is that invitation where we hear throughout scripture: that it is for freedom that we have been set free! This is the place where we know the way because we’ve been walking it. We know the truth because it has found us. We know life because it is actually ours.

Faith is the invitation into life. It is an invitation to be grown. And yet oftentimes, as we’ve grown up, many of us have thought that being grown up means being safe, means being never vulnerable, means we have all of the right answers, and we puff up our egos to keep us safe and lose the innocence and possibility that we knew when we were children. But I think the beauty of faith is actually that it’s a both/and.

⁵ Sölle, 115.

⁶ Emilie M. Townes, “To Be Called Beloved,” in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims, 183-202 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 183-4.

⁷ Richard Rohr with Michael Morrell, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2016).

⁸ Quoted in Sölle, 68.



It's an invitation to remember the vulnerability of our humanity, to remember the joy of the kid who jumped in puddles, who wasn't afraid to proclaim things loudly and be a grasshopper in church, AND to also be one who also knows what it means to wrestle thoughtfully and intentionally with the invitations of faith in order to live as a responsible grownup.⁹

When I was a junior high youth associate at my church while I was in college, I was at a camp with some of our youth where many of them came to experience God's love for themselves for the first time. That week was amazing as I watched them come alive. Have you ever seen that happen, when someone has come alive because they knew that they're loved by God? One afternoon I wrote a song at camp for them because I didn't want them or us to forget those moments. The lyrics went, "Let's not grow old. Let's not grow wiser to the world. Let's not forget that God's brought us this far. 'Cuz we aren't strong enough or wise enough to make it." And then I said, "So what?"

This is the invitation into the way, the truth, and the life. In a way, it's a childlike faith because it remembers the joy and the vulnerability of what it means to just be who God has made you to be. But it's also a grown-up faith that knows the pain, but continues to show up, not because we have all the answers, but because we know that being a good grown-up demands we wrestle with the questions and in so doing we find God more deeply and truly in the midst of them. We make this way by walking in it. We turn towards and orient our lives into the Great I AM. The I AM who holds and sustains and calls and loves each of us. And then we walk the way and little bit by little bit, we realize it is the truth, and we know that we have life. We take hands, we walk with one another more deeply into that heart of love of this God, as we know the way, the truth, and the life for ourselves.

There're a couple of reasons why I think this way of understanding John's gospel matters and I want to share this with you and let you know what it's meant for my life. While I was growing up and didn't think that I could just let go and move into the rhythm of God's love, I tried to control everything, to get all the right answers and to prove I knew them all in order to keep myself safe. Living a faith like this and relating to God as an authoritarian figure, impacts how we live with one another. It impacts the way that we show up, the way we're willing to let the stories of the world around us disrupt us... or not. I know this was and has been true of my life. It has meant that I was a lot more anxious, much more rigid, and much more judgmental of myself and others.

⁹ As Sollee wrote, "the more you grow into love, into the message of Jesus -... The more vulnerable you make yourself. When you spread your life around rather than hoarding it, then the great light becomes visible within you... To choose life means to embrace the cross. A means to put up with the cross, the difficulties, the lack of success, the fear of standing alone. Tradition has never promised us a rose garden. To embrace the cross today needs to grow into existence. The cross will turn green cloth. We survived across. We grow and suffering. We become the tree of life." Dorothee Sölle, *Theology for Skeptics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 104.



And over time as I have discovered a faith that is not about obedience or control, but about surrender to the way, the truth, and the life. I have found anew a faith that has made me freer to truly love God and to love my neighbor as myself. I know, and am know fully every day, a faith that is life and breath. I am a not a servant but a beloved child who is becoming more grown-up inside of a way of life that seeks to live responsibly in the face of the call of love.

So my question to you and to us this morning is, “What does ‘I am the way, the truth, and the life’ mean to you?” What do you think Jesus means in saying that? Where are you are afraid that if you got out of the boat, into the water of God’s love that maybe you’d drown or look foolish? Where might there be fear that’s keeping you from moving more deeply into the way, the truth, and the life that is God?

And the third question I have is, “What would it look like if even this week you were to take a vulnerable step more deeply into the way, into that vulnerable faith space where you release ego, and both remember your childhood joy and allow space for the questions and wonders and fears that adulthood brings?”

This way we can walk with the world and with one another in solidarity, cheering each other on as we each see to walk more deeply in that love. Not from places of judgment because we have it figured out, but from places of invitation where we say, “Hey, look at that risk you just took. That’s awesome!” :Look at that way that you just choose love over self-protection. How cool!” The way, the truth, and the life is that which we then affirm and celebrate with one another. This is the place where, as the old Audio Adrenaline song reminds us, “It’s big, big house with lots and lots of rooms, a big, big yard where we can play football.”¹⁰

A house where even this Twins fan can play baseball with the Yankees, right?

That’s the way, the truth, and the life. It’s a home for each of us, where all of us get to reside in a glorious presence of the God of love. So to that God who has created the precious life of each of us, the God who is immeasurably more than all we could ask or imagine, may this God fill our hearts and minds. May God’s Spirit breathe where we feel weak or vulnerable or afraid and give us strength and courage to move into the way, to join God in the dance of God’s goodness and kingdom here on earth, and may we be people who are identified as people who live the way.

Let us join hands with one another and walk with one another more deeply into this great I AM as we pray together. O great I AM, be our way. Lead us in truth and bring us into the fullness of your life everlasting. We surrender ourselves to your great love, oh one who is and was, and is to come. God rid us of all gods but by thyself, for your sake, for ours, and for our neighbors. Come, O great I AM. Amen.

¹⁰ Audio Adrenaline, “Big House,” *Don’t Censor Me* (Franklin, TN: Forerfront, 1993).

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- This as a critique of that which is just intellectual affirmation, as more than a formulation of certainty, but an invitation of love to walk in the way of faith- to be and to become a people of the way, a people of the truth, and a people of life.
- We make the way by walking it and so we, take hands, we turn toward and into the great I am, the ground of our being, and towards one another and we become.

Sermon

- **Intro to Sermon Series**
- **Intro to my time up north**

I was up north two weeks ago, working on my dissertation. Jeff texting me to do more writing less pontoon boat riding. And I spent some time writing not only my dissertation but also this sermon (which, I usually just write in my head and then robustly outline before I preach them. Which now of course, I’m proving to you that I don’t actually write them because I don’t actually have a script for what I’m saying right now, but anyway, I digress...)

So I wanted to tell you a bit about my dissertation this morning. Not only because I’ve used all of my study leave for the year in order to work on it (thank you for your generosity in the compensation package that includes time for me to become a better theologian and pastor BUT also because in Mark Patrick’s being willing to join

in the preaching rotation this summer (thank you Mark), this meant that we switched around the dates and while I'd have been happy to preach on the resurrection and the life (as this is my jam- I wrote my statement of faith in Seminary centered around the theme of resurrection and have preached about it a lot this year), so I was quite pleased with the challenge to have to actually find language to flesh out something I know I've been evolving in my understanding of over the past, I don't know, let's say 15 years...or well, I guess my life. And it's this: what does it mean that Jesus is recorded here in John as having said 'I am the Way the truth, and the life'?"

As I noted in my first sermon in this wonderful summer series (thank you Holy Spirit and Jeff or thinking we should do this- to be clear I don't think that Jeff is the Holy Spirit, but you know I do believe in a theology that we are or can be ones who cooperate with God's Spirit by listening to the invitations, intuitions and noticings of our own soul and spirit, but again, I digress). Will this be the sermon of continued digressions? Well, maybe, but you'll have to stick around and see.

So the point I'm making here is that I'm really happy to have this opportunity to preach and be with you this morning to work out with you something that I feel god has been working out in an through in these last years.

Namely again, what does it mean that Jesus is the way the truth and the life?

- **"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life"**
- **How I grew up understanding this passage.**

As I grew up this meant that Christianity was the only way to know Jesus, and to just any Christianity either, but one like I embraced at a young age. A being born again. Well here's what's weird, at least I think it's a bit odd in the way that we normally speak about things like faith and religion.

- **Both Similar & Different**

I both believe all of this is more true in ways that I never did before, that I believe we must be born again, that I believe that Jesus animates something important about the WAY that we move into the waters of knowing the great I am AND AT THE SAME TIME, this looks radically and totally unfamiliar to how I might have understood and articulated. Some of this is because, as it turns out, the developmental capacity and intellectual prowess of 4-year-old Sara WG, who was only Sara W then, was not exactly the same as it is today (thank heavens)

BUT also, because God has changed me. Let me say more about this...

Loving God and knowing Christ is both so much more than I every thought it could be yet also shockingly resonates with the relational-mystical love of God I first was

compelled by. And I want to talk with you this morning about that by way of telling you some about my dissertation. 662

- **This congregation as a third space and why I came here**

- **Tell You about my dissertation**

My dissertation's working title is: "Dangerous Memories". By employing the language of "dangerous memories" I am employing the language of German Catholic theologian Johann Baptist Metz. He was along especially with Jürgen Moltmann and Dorothee Solle (and, as I argue in my dissertation, Dietrich Bonhoeffer,) proponents of what has been labeled as the new political theology.

What the new political theologians are wrestling with: (insert from my dissertation)

- **New Political theology**

Resonances with today: secularization, relationship between faith and politics, issues of race, justice. Perennial question of what does it mean to be and live as Christian...which is no less our problem, right?

- **What they were responding to**

- **What we are responding to**

The way I grew up hearing and understanding this passage. And in a way, I want to both critique some of the ways that this passage has been interpreted inside of some of our Christian interpretations you've never heard any interpretation of this before, then not exactly my apologies, but more so, welcome to a brief lesson in the history of interpretation of this passage) and to offer us some invitations for how and what it might mean for us to be Christian in our time:

- **Bonhoeffer in LPP: Faith in a World Come of Age**

(A religious interpretation of Christianity) means, in my opinion, to speak metaphysically, on the one hand, and on the other, individualistically. Neither way is appropriate, either for the biblical message or for people today. Hasn't the individualistic question of saving our personal souls almost faded away for most of us? Isn't it our impression that there are really more important things than this question? I know it sounds outrageous to say that, but after all, isn't it fundamentally biblical? Does the question of saving one's soul even come up in the Old Testament? Isn't God's righteousness and kingdom on earth the center of everything? And isn't Rom. 3:24ff. the culmination of the view that God alone is righteous, rather than any individualistic doctrine of salvation? What matters is not the beyond but this world, how it is created and preserved, is given laws, reconciled, and renewed. What is beyond this world is meant, in the gospel, to be there FOR this

world... in the biblical sense of the creation and the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.¹

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The major point is that the Church must face that the world has “come of age.” This form of Christianity is one where God is not at the end of human strength—God is not the boundary, rather God is and must be at the center. Christianity in this space moves even more into a decidedly “this-worldly” way of being and throws off its metaphysical and individualistic self-understanding. This is a faith where the Christ event has profound significance. Of the incarnation, death, and resurrection we must still speak, though we must find a new language with which to give voice. However, the problem is that the church refuses to deal with this “world come of age” and persists in self-preservation which is evidenced by the turn to moralizing and the focus in many churches on the inner life of sin. Bonhoeffer is unequivocal that this moralizing approach will not work in a world that no longer needs God and is uninterested in metaphysical notions. Rather, the church will only persist in so far as it becomes one that is constituted by prayer and the doing of justice that finds a way to move in the world by employing and enacting new, liberating language. This God now is most fully a weak God—the God who is known in the suffering in the world and on the cross. Christians are those who are called by God to be with God in the world, and this call demands that they stay awake in the garden and face the suffering in the world. This is a faith which is “being-for-others.”

Yet the church doesn't want to face this reality. Instead the church desires the continuance of its religion. This form of Christianity has actually gone away, yet a few still exist who are intellectually dishonest and fight for its maintenance. He writes: “Are we supposed to fall all over precisely this dubious lot of people in our zeal or disappointment or woe and try to peddle our wares to them? Or should we jump on a few unfortunates in their hour of weakness and commit, so to speak, religious rape?”¹ And from this place he begins to into what then is the situation for the church, and what does the lordship of Christ mean in this space of religionless Christianity? He wrestles to articulate what church or liturgy will look like in this new environment: “How do we talk about God—without religion, that is without the temporally conditioned presuppositions of metaphysics the inner life and so on?”² How is this to be the church in the world? He notes that the words we once used must become silenced:

What reconciliation and redemption mean, rebirth and Holy Spirit, love for one's enemies, cross and resurrection, what it means to live in Christ and follow Christ, all that is so difficult and remote that we hardly dare speak of it anymore. In these words and actions handed down to us, we sense something totally new and revolutionary, but we cannot yet grasp it and express it. This is our own fault. Our church has been fighting during these years only for its self-preservation, as if that were an end in itself. It has become incapable of bringing the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and to the world. So the words we used before must lose their power, be silenced, and we can be Christians today only in two ways,

through prayer and in doing justice among human beings. All Christian thinking, talking, and organizing must be born anew, out of that prayer and action.³ 664

1 Ibid., 363.

2 Ibid., 364.

3 Ibid., 389.

He writes this to articulate how the "word became flesh" calls us to account for how we are present in this world and the way we pray and work towards a world where all become human through resurrection. In some ways this is not so radical a concept, yet it becomes radicalized as it is enacted in the world. For what does this mean that he lowered the vision of what Christianity from being initially about a far-off coming kingdom to a very this worldly call? How does this faith find words in a world that is beset by violence and suffering? The "becoming of flesh" of Christ becomes the shape and grounds for the gestation of Christian thought and action in the world come of age.

1 Ibid., 372-73.

- **What I'm saying...not a proposition but an invitation to a way of being.**

Some of you might be like: Sara, you're killing me, you're killing my faith. Part of me says YAY and welcome! For faith in God isn't something we possess, it is what possesses and holds US, and I think it brings us more deeply into the biblical reality that John bears witness too...we construct these religious boxes of what faith means and we forget that we are actually called to a life-long transformational encounter with the great I am. Like with faith its like relationships: I can read and read all I want about how to have a healthy marriage, but I assure you that if I don't listen to Andy, if I don't practice love, it means nothing (remember I Corinthians 13, friends!).

That's the point here and what I'm saying, We have, as the church, so too often made I am the way the truth and the life a formulation that gives us the right answer- I put in my money and out pops my Jesus candy (the church has so often, we so often have sought to pretend we have all of the answers instead of point to and inviting people into and being willing ourselves to get out of the boat and in faith to walk out on the ocean of God's love!

- **Dorothee Solle & Mysticism**

"The topic of disinterested, non-calculating, and purposeless love for the sake of love is central to mysticism as such. To love God, not because of powerful institutions, or even because God commands it, but to do so in an act of unencumbered freedom, is the very source of mystical relation. To love God is all the reason there needs to be . . . The orthodoxies that have been handed down to us in the monotheistic religions called for obedience to the commanding God. They threatened with punishment and enticed with rewards - images of hell and heaven resting on that authority. In

technologically advanced centers of the world, authoritarian religious systems are in 665 sharp decline. Mystical perceptions and approaches to God, however, are entirely different: "God, if I worship Thee in fear of hell, burn me in hell. And if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise; but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, withhold not Thine everlasting Beauty" (Aldous Huxley, in *The Perennial Philosophy*). Mysticism may be regarded as the anti-authoritarian religion per se. In it, the commanding lord becomes the beloved; what is to come later becomes the now; and naked or even enlightened self-interest that is oriented by reward and punishment becomes mystical freedom."

— Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*

Regarding the mystical tradition: "in this perspective people do not worship God because of God's power and domination. They rather want to "drown" themselves in God's take up your conformity here we know life abundantly love, which is the "ground" of their existence.... Here our relationship to God is not one of obedience but of union; it is not a matter of a distant God exacting sacrifice and self-denial, but rather a matter of agreement and consent, of being at one with what is alive. And this then becomes what religion is about. When this happens solidarity will replace obedience as the dominant virtue." Excerpts from *domination to solidarity* from *Creative Disobedience*, X I I-XX

- **The I am and Shekinah**

The Shekinah (so much excitement and connection to the Old Testament and Jewish though about the Great I am!!!) glory of God was understood by Jewish anchors is the indwelling presence of God in the world... To say then as Christ does I the way the truth and the life point soon exemplifies the most profound and dwelling of God possible in the midst of our world. The great I am, the God of all life is and was and is to come, the Shekinah glory is that which we not only follow but the reality and the midst in which we live and breathe and have our very being so do not tell me that faith is the sense of obedience, instead that faith of the things of life that I can hold the same thing called us into this game I am the way the truth and the life mainly the people whom we call life and no all life and are the life from the moment we first have breath until the moment we die we are not called to obedience we are called to and residing in the Shekinah of the God of all glory and the life the great I am. This indeed is the fear of the Lord of which the Jewish writers speak of in the Old Testament... A terror which is realized when the bell of sovereignty and the demand of the king who asks obedience rules (common, that is too easy!!!) from that to the demand of all lives themselves and sold than beings in Hartford fibers of as brief thing know, obedience is easy... But life lived fully on clothes in the presence of the Shekinah God of glory the truth and the light and the life which exposes the whole of the pain and suffering that evil within our own beings. (is this not why Paul challenges the Corinthians that they are still drinking milk but he wants them to move to be grown up people?!?! To be grown up demands us to face in the terror and be a grown up (Carol's FB thread)

... Is this not why the deed substitute for cheap grace, a simple obedience of which 666 feature Bonhoeffer wrote? Is this not why in our marital and friendship relationship the closest proximity we at times with strangers? For the weight of the Shekinah glory of the embodied knowing the truth of our lives is indeed have hit my friend, we have this promise the Shekinah glory of the great I am, this fire is not consume killer. No, indeed the power of this fire is that it is that which produces life I am the way the truth Jesus Breen on and they receive the spirit breathed on the breath of God seems friends of faith which tells you the Bible is a mere book that tells us how to live. No, the Bible is not this. As the opening of the book of John reminds us in the beginning was the word and the Word was God was and in this word was the way of life and this life was the light of faith is not a new rulebook for our life. The cable we follow is not one who makes us of the... No it is one that calls us to discover h our rightful place as heirs of life. Following the great I is a life long offense of surrender to the Shekinah glory, a willingness to find ourselves not sprinkled (reference the Emily Collins home here, the saturated and enveloped with in the reality of the great I am. It is the surrender of the whole selves to be, people of the way of life. So when you notice the terror, when you find your fist clenching, when you fear exposure of that which you hold both dear the places of vulnerability, go deeper in. There is a life there. There is hope there. Harris truth. There is liberation. There is freedom. Go deeper for here the love of the great I am will transform your fears he'll people of the truth. Here we know life abundantly.

- **Vulnerable faith**

As Sollee wrote, "the more you grow into love, into the message of Jesus –... The more vulnerable you make yourself. When you spread your life around rather than hoarding it, then the great light becomes visible within you... To choose life means to embrace the cross. A means to put up with the cross, the difficulties, the lack of success, the fear of standing alone. Tradition has never promised us a rose garden. To embrace the cross today needs to grow into existence. The cross will turn green cloth. We survived across. We grow and suffering. We become the tree of life." Thology for skeptics, 104.

Meister Eckhart; "God rid me of God invites us to transcend every God who is less than love. It was this preaching that was seen as a danger and with political consequences that even Luther himself sought to put down for as Bloch noted, " A subject who though himself to be in personal union with the Lord of Lords provided, when things got serious, a very poor example indeed of selfhood."

Remember the challenge and admonition- it is for freedom that you have been set free, so why then have you put on the yoke of slavery?"

Love and suffering- "To death do us part" That there is a trueness of love that is laid bare in the midst of a suffering that in vulnerability that can turn to the other and allow oneself to be seen. This is the power of what happened that week as we miscarried- Andy turned toward me and I toward him. And how many of us have not known the pain of one whom we loved who turned away? When you asked to work

on the relationship and were refused? For the ability to endure pain shows itself as the purest form of love for it exposes love as what it really is- love is that which renders us so vulnerable that it is our undoing- though in this way too (as it true of all Christian paradox, it is our way into life and life abundantly. 667

This is why Eckhart said: "God, rid me of God, for it is a refusal of the things that appear to be the. The ways in which love that is just the easy first feelings exposes how shriveled and immature our love is. This is the power of a love of older people who have weathered the story of life and you can see in their eyes as the look at each other that they love every fiber of the other person- this is life abundantly, not the love that we pay for or love that pretends we are ourselves glory, but the love that sees us in our weakness and intercedes to find us and bring us into the way of life everlasting and true, the life and the water for which our souls long.

- **Faith as Terror Management**

So why do we refuse this love? I suppose this is because it in it's way is it's own type of yoke- we have learned the terrors of our growing up, do you remember your first encounters of shame or when you first learned that the world was unsafe? (insert examples)

The great I am and the terror

Religion as Terror Management

Encountering the great I am as an invitation into the terror and finding ourselves consumed by love.

- **Faith as the way into life**

- **We don't have to be afraid of that- we are invited to be grown in our faith**

And so we close off our truest selves and joy and longings and lock them safely away. But the god of goodness, the great I am who is the way and the truth and the life extends to us the had of loving compassion, inviting us to come out and dance and remember the joy we knew as children- to splash in puddles.

When I was 19 I wrote a song for the kids in my youth group and it went like this: "Lest we forget that we aren't able. Lest we forget these times. May our hearts be ever open to love. Let's not grow old, let's not grow wiser to the world. Let's not forget that God's brought us this far. Cuz we are strong enough or wise enough to make it...so what? Cuz God's good enough and strong enough and wise enough, God is enough for you. And God's carrying your hurts and pain, this love will always be the same for your. Yes God's good enough and strong enough and wise for you. So let's not grow old, let's not grow wiser to the world, let's not forget that's brought us this far. For we aren't wise enough or strong enough to make it, so what?"

- **Childlike AND grown**

May we, with child-like faith, re-enter the kingdom of love. The great I am is calling. The shekina glory of God longs to have an indwelling within you. The God of all calls to us to love God with all that we are sooner you will and to know this love for ourselves.

- **God who is the I am- making God vulnerable through being with us**
- **This as a critique of that which is just intellectual affirmation, as more than a formulation of certainty, but an invitation of love to walk in the way of faith- to be and to become a people of the way, a people of the truth, and a people of life.**

My article on the erotic- Critique of Augustine- they thought they could rationally contain and control God. But that which we can think or fully apprehend is NOT God. To know God is to LIVE in God to live love. To live in the I am who IS the WAY the TRUTH and the LIFE. This doesn't mean we throw out rationality (or the law) but that grace and love supersedes it (sound familiar at all- I did not come to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill it- to make it overflow) And so the knowing of God the live lived in the flow and the dance said for those of you who love Richard Rohr or Emilie Townes or music as I do) is to move into it. It's to get out of the boat its to take the risk. It's to find that we don't drown we won't be burned or consumed but we will become a people who walk on water, who handle snakes and aren't bitten, a people of the WAY of the TRUTH and of LIFE.

- **We make the way by walking it and so we, take hands, we turn toward and into the great I am, the ground of our being, and towards one another and we become.**

The great I am is the way, The truth, and the life.

Surrender to the life, and may it be yours in abundance.

- **Self-Examination Time/INvitation**

And now to the God who does immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine. The only wise one, fill your hearts and minds, and be your life. For life is our destiny and our invitation, my friends. To life.

“Oh great I am, be our way, lead us in truth, and bring us into the fullness of your life everlasting. We surrender ourselves to your love oh one who is and was and is to come. God rid of any God but thyself. For your sake, for ours, and for our neighbors.”
AMEN.

1 Ibid., 372-73.

Intro to the Sermon Series

Intro to my writing my dissertation and reasons this is a struggle.

Being up north two weeks ago and Jeff texting me to do more writing less pontoon boat riding. And I spent some time writing not only my dissertation but also this sermon (which, I usually just write in my head and then robustly outline before I preach them. Which now of course, I'm proving to you that I don't actually write them because I don't actually have a script for what I'm saying right now, but anyway, I digress...

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As I noted in my first sermon in this wonderful summer series (thank you Holy Spirit and Jeff or thinking we should do this- to be clear I don't think that Jeff is the Holy Spirit, but you know I do believe in a theology that we are or can be ones who cooperate with God's Spirit by listening to the invitations, intuitions and noticings of our own soul and spirit, but again, I digress). Will this be the sermon of continued digressions? Well, maybe, but you'll have to stick around and see.

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Namely again, what does it mean that Jesus is the way the truth and the life?

As I grew up this meant that Christianity was the only way to know Jesus, and to just any Christianity either, but one like I embraced at a young age. A being born again. Well here's what's weird, at least I think it's a bit odd in the way that we normally speak about things like faith and religion.

I both believe all of this is more true in ways that I never did before, that I believe we must be born again, that I believe that Jesus animates something important about the WAY that we move into the waters of knowing the great I am AND AT THE SAME TIME, this looks radically and totally unfamiliar to how I might have understood and articulated. Some of this is because, as it turns out, the developmental capacity and intellectual prowess of 4-year-old Sara WG, who was only Sara W then, was not exactly the same as it is today (thank heavens) 670

BUT also, because God has changed me. Let me say more about this...

Loving God and knowing Christ is both so much more than I every thought it could be yet also shockingly resonates with the relational-mystical love of God I first was compelled by. And I want to talk with you this morning about that by way of telling you some about my dissertation.

My dissertations' working title is: "Dangerous Memories". By employing the language of "dangerous memories" I am employing the language of German Catholic theologian Johann Baptist Metz. He was along especially with Jürgen Moltmann and Dorothee Solle (and, as I argue in my dissertation, Dietrich Bonhoeffer,) proponents of what has been labeled as the new political theology.

Political theology definition (briefly)
New political theology.

Resonances with today: secularization, relationship between faith and politics, issues of race, justice. Perennial question of what does it mean to be and live as Christian...which is no less our problem, right?

The way I grew up hearing and understanding this passage. And in a way, I want to both critique some of the ways that this passage has been interpreted inside of some of our Christian interpretations you've never heard any interpretation of this before, then not exactly my apologies, but more so, welcome to a brief lesson in the history of interpretation of this passage) and to offer us some invitations for how and what it might mean for us to be Christian in our time:

What the new political theologians are wrestling with: (insert from my dissertation)

Bonhoeffer:

(A religious interpretation of Christianity) means, in my opinion, to speak metaphysically, on the one hand, and on the other, individualistically. Neither way is appropriate, either for the biblical message or for people today. Hasn't the individualistic question of saving our personal souls almost faded away for most of us? Isn't it our impression that there are really more important things than this

question? I know it sounds outrageous to say that, but after all, isn't it fundamentally biblical? Does the question of saving one's soul even come up in the Old Testament? Isn't God's righteousness and kingdom on earth the center of everything? And isn't Rom. 3:24ff. the culmination of the view that God alone is righteous, rather than any individualistic doctrine of salvation? What matters is not the beyond but this world, how it is created and preserved, is given laws, reconciled, and renewed. What is beyond this world is meant, in the gospel, to be there FOR this world... in the biblical sense of the creation and the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.¹

The major point is that the Church must face that the world has “come of age.” This form of Christianity is one where God is not at the end of human strength—God is not the boundary, rather God is and must be at the center. Christianity in this space moves even more into a decidedly “this-worldly” way of being and throws off its metaphysical and individualistic self-understanding. This is a faith where the Christ event has profound significance. Of the incarnation, death, and resurrection we must still speak, though we must find a new language with which to give voice. However, the problem is that the church refuses to deal with this “world come of age” and persists in self-preservation which is evidenced by the turn to moralizing and the focus in many churches on the inner life of sin. Bonhoeffer is unequivocal that this moralizing approach will not work in a world that no longer needs God and is uninterested in metaphysical notions. Rather, the church will only persist in so far as it becomes one that is constituted by prayer and the doing of justice that finds a way to move in the world by employing and enacting new, liberating language. This God now is most fully a weak God—the God who is known in the suffering in the world and on the cross. Christians are those who are called by God to be with God in the world, and this call demands that they stay awake in the garden and face the suffering in the world. This is a faith which is “being-for-others.”

Yet the church doesn't want to face this reality. Instead the church desires the continuance of its religion. This form of Christianity has actually gone away, yet a few still exist who are intellectually dishonest and fight for its maintenance. He writes: “Are we supposed to fall all over precisely this dubious lot of people in our zeal or disappointment or woe and try to peddle our wares to them? Or should we jump on a few unfortunates in their hour of weakness and commit, so to speak, religious rape?”¹ And from this place he begins to into what then is the situation for the church, and what does the lordship of Christ mean in this space of religionless Christianity? He wrestles to articulate what church or liturgy will look like in this new environment: “How do we talk about God—without religion, that is without the temporally conditioned presuppositions of metaphysics the inner life and so on?”² How is this to be the church in the world? He notes that the words we once used must become silenced:

What reconciliation and redemption mean, rebirth and Holy Spirit, love for one's enemies, cross and resurrection, what it means to live in Christ and follow Christ, all that is so difficult and remote that we hardly dare speak of it anymore. In these words and actions handed down to us, we sense something totally new and

revolutionary, but we cannot yet grasp it and express it. This is our own fault. Our church has been fighting during these years only for its self-preservation, as if that were an end in itself. It has become incapable of bringing the word of reconciliation and redemption to humankind and to the world. So the words we used before must lose their power, be silenced, and we can be Christians today only in two ways, through prayer and in doing justice among human beings. All Christian thinking, talking, and organizing must be born anew, out of that prayer and action.³ 672

1 Ibid., 363.

2 Ibid., 364.

3 Ibid., 389.

He writes this to articulate how the "word became flesh" calls us to account for how we are present in this world and the way we pray and work towards a world where all become human through resurrection. In some ways this is not so radical a concept, yet it becomes radicalized as it is enacted in the world. For what does this mean that he lowered the vision of what Christianity from being initially about a far-off coming kingdom to a very this worldly call? How does this faith find words in a world that is beset by violence and suffering? The "becoming of flesh" of Christ becomes the shape and grounds for the gestation of Christian thought and action in the world come of age.

1 Ibid., 372-73.

Some of you might be like: Sara, you're killing me, you're killing my faith. Part of me says YAY and welcome! For faith in God isn't something we possess, it is what possesses and holds US, and I think it brings us more deeply into the biblical reality that John bears witness too...we construct these religious boxes of what faith means and we forget that we are actually called to a life-long transformational encounter with the great I am. Like with faith its like relationships: I can read and read all I want about how to have a healthy marriage, but I assure you that if I don't listen to Andy, if I don't practice love, it means nothing (remember I Corinthians 13, friends!).

That's the point here and what I'm saying, We have, as the church, so too often made I am the way the truth and the life a formulation that gives us the right answer- I put in my money and out pops my Jesus candy (the church has so often, we so often have sought to pretend we have all of the answers instead of point to and inviting people into and being willing ourselves to get out of the boat and in faith to walk out on the ocean of God's love!

“The topic of disinterested, non-calculating, and purposeless love for the sake of love is central to mysticism as such. To love God, not because of powerful institutions, or even because God commands it, but to do so in an act of unencumbered freedom, is the very source of mystical relation. To love God is all the reason there needs to be . . . The orthodoxies that have been handed down to us in the monotheistic religions called for obedience to the commanding God. They threatened with punishment and enticed with rewards - images of hell and heaven resting on that authority. In technologically advanced centers of the world, authoritarian religious systems are in sharp decline. Mystical perceptions and approaches to God, however, are entirely different: "God, if I worship Thee in fear of hell, burn me in hell. And if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise; but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, withhold not Thine everlasting Beauty" (Aldous Huxley, in *The Perennial Philosophy*). Mysticism may be regarded as the anti-authoritarian religion per se. In it, the commanding lord becomes the beloved; what is to come later becomes the now; and naked or even enlightened self-interest that is oriented by reward and punishment becomes mystical freedom.”

— Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*

Regarding the mystical tradition: "in this perspective people do not worship God because of God's power and domination. They rather want to "drown" themselves in God's take up your conformity here we know life abundantly love, which is the "ground" of their existence.... Here our relationship to God is not one of obedience but of union; it is not a matter of a distant God exacting sacrifice and self-denial, but rather a matter of agreement and consent, of being at one with what is alive. And this then becomes what religion is about. When this happens solidarity will replace obedience as the dominant virtue." Excerpts from *domination to solidarity from Creative Disobedience*, X I I-XX

The Shekinah (so much excitement and connection to the Old Testament and Jewish though about the Great I am!!!) glory of God was understood by Jewish anchors is the indwelling presence of God in the world... To say then as Christ does I the way the truth and the life point soon exemplifies the most profound and dwelling of God possible in the midst of our world. The great I am, the God of all life is and was and is to come, the Shekinah glory is that which we not only follow but the reality and the midst in which we live and breathe and have our very being so do not tell me that faith is the sense of obedience, instead that faith of the things of life that I can hold the same thing called us into this game I am the way the truth and the life mainly the people whom we call life and no all life and are the life from the moment we first have breath until the moment we die we are not called to obedience we are called to and residing in the Shekinah of the God of all glory and the life the great I am. This indeed is the fear of the Lord of which the Jewish writers speak of in the Old Testament... A terror which is realized when the bell of sovereignty and the demand of the king who asks obedience rules (common, that is too easy!!!) from that to the demand of all lives themselves and sold than beings in Hartford fibers of as brief

thing know, obedience is easy... But life lived fully on clothes in the presence of the Shekinah God of glory the truth and the light and the life which exposes the whole of the pain and suffering that evil within our own beings. (is this not why Paul challenges the Corinthians that they are still drinking milk but he wants them to move to be grown up people?!?! To be grown up demands us to face in the terror and be a grown up (Carol's FB thread) 674

... Is this not why the deed substitute for cheap grace, a simple obedience of which feature Bonhoeffer wrote? Is this not why in our marital and friendship relationship the closest proximity we at times with strangers? For the weight of the Shekinah glory of the embodied knowing the truth of our lives is indeed have hit my friend, we have this promise the Shekinah glory of the great I am, this fire is not consume killer. No, indeed the power of this fire is that it is that which produces life I am the way the truth Jesus Breen on and they receive the spirit breathed on the breath of God seems friends of faith which tells you the Bible is a mere book that tells us how to live. No, the Bible is not this. As the opening of the book of John reminds us in the beginning was the word and the Word was God was and in this word was the way of life and this life was the light of faith is not a new rulebook for our life. The cable we follow is not one who makes us of the... No it is one that calls us to discover h our rightful place as heirs of life. Following the great I is a life long offense of surrender to the Shekinah glory, a willingness to find ourselves not sprinkled (reference the Emily Collins home here, the saturated and enveloped with in the reality of the great I am. It is the surrender of the whole selves to be, people of the way of life. So when you notice the terror, when you find your fist clenching, when you fear exposure of that which you hold both dear the places of vulnerability, go deeper in. There is a life there. There is hope there. Harris truth. There is liberation. There is freedom. Go deeper for here the love of the great I am will transform your fears he'll people of the truth. Here we know life abundantly.

As Sollee wrote, "the more you grow into love, into the message of Jesus –... The more vulnerable you make yourself. When you spread your life around rather than hoarding it, then the great light becomes visible within you... To choose life means to embrace the cross. A means to put up with the cross, the difficulties, the lack of success, the fear of standing alone. Tradition has never promised us a rose garden. To embrace the cross today needs to grow into existence. The cross will turn green cloth. We survived across. We grow and suffering. We become the tree of life." Thology for skeptics, 104.

Meister Eckhart; "God rid me of God invites us to transcend every God who is less than love. It was this preaching that was seen as a danger and with political consequences that even Luther himself sought to put down for as Bloch noted, " A subject who though himself to be in personal union with the Lord of Lords provided, when things got serious, a very poor example indeed of selfhood."

Remember the challenge and admonition- it is for freedom that you have been set free, so why then have you put on the yoke of slavery?"

Love and suffering- "To death do us part" That there is a trueness of love that is laid bare in the midst of a suffering that in vulnerability that can turn to the other and allow oneself to be seen. This is the power of what happened that week as we miscarried- Andy turned toward me and I toward him. And how many of us have not known the pain of one whom we loved who turned away? When you asked to work on the relationship and were refused? For the ability to endure pain shows itself as the purest form of love for it exposes love as what it really is- love is that which renders us so vulnerable that it is our undoing- though in this way too (as it true of all Christian paradox, it is our way into life and life abundantly. 675

This is why Eckhart said: "God, rid me of God, for it is a refusal of the things that appear to be the. The ways in which love that is just the easy first feelings exposes how shriveled and immature our love is. This is the power of a love of older people who have weathered the story of life and you can see in their eyes as they look at each other that they love every fiber of the other person- this is life abundantly, not the love that we pay for or love that pretends we are ourselves glory, but the love that sees us in our weakness and intercedes to find us and bring us into the way of life everlasting and true, the life and the water for which our souls long.

So why do we refuse this love? I suppose this is because it in its way is its own type of yoke- we have learned the terrors of our growing up, do you remember your first encounters of shame or when you first learned that the world was unsafe? (insert examples)

And so we close off our truest selves and joy and longings and lock them safely away. But the god of goodness, the great I am who is the way and the truth and the life extends to us the had of loving compassion, inviting us to come out and dance and remember the joy we knew as children- to splash in puddles.

When I was 19 I wrote a song for the kids in my youth group and it went like this: "Lest we forget that we aren't able. Lest we forget these times. May our hearts be ever open to love. Let's not grow old, let's not grow wiser to the world. Let's not forget that God's brought us this far. Cuz we are strong enough or wise enough to make it...so what? Cuz God's good enough and strong enough and wise enough, God is enough for you. And God's carrying your hurts and pain, this love will always be the same for your. Yes God's good enough and strong enough and wise for you. So let's not grow old, let's not grow wiser to the world, let's not forget that's brought us this far. For we aren't wise enough or strong enough to make it, so what?"

May we, with child-like faith, re-enter the kingdom of love. The great I am is calling. The shekina glory of God longs to have an indwelling within you. The God of all calls to us to love God with all that we are sooner you will and to know this love for ourselves.

The great I am and the terror
Religion as Terror Management

Encountering the great I am as an invitation into the terror and finding ourselves consumed by love. 676

My article on the erotic- Critique of Augustine- they thought they could rationally contain and control God. But that which we can think or fully apprehend is NOT God. To know God is to LIVE in God to live love. To live in the I am who IS the WAY the TRUTH and the LIFE. This doesn't mean we throw out rationality (or the law) but that grace and love supersedes it (sound familiar at all- I did not come to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill it- to make it overflow) And so the knowing of God the live lived in the flow and the dance said for those of you who love Richard Rohr or Emilie Townes or music as I do) is to move into it. It's to get out of the boat its to take the risk. It's to find that we don't drown we won't be burned or consumed but we will become a people who walk on water, who handle snakes and aren't bitten, a people of the WAY of the TRUTH and of LIFE.

The great I am is the way, The truth, and the life.

Surrender to the life, and may it be yours in abundance.

And now to the God who does immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine. The only wise one, fill your hearts and minds, and be your life. For life is our destiny and our invitation, my friends. To life.

"Oh great I am, be our way, lead us in truth, and bring us into the fullness of your life everlasting. We surrender ourselves to your love oh one who is and was and is to come. God rid of any God but thyself. For your sake, for ours, and for our neighbors." AMEN.

1 Ibid., 372-73.



And Jesus Said “I AM the Vine”

John 15:1-17

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit, he prunes to make it bear more fruit. If you have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you, abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

I am the vine. You are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit. Because apart from me, you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers. Such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me so I have loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

This is my commandment: that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer because the servant does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything that I've heard from my Father.

You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.”

- John 15:1-17

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Well, good morning. Let us pray.

Oh Great I AM, may your Spirit's breath your great love into every fiber of our beings. Give us courage, strength, humility, and fortitude that we might endure in abiding. For it's in your name we pray. Amen.



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Again- good morning! It's good to be with you all. As many of you know (though some of you don't!) we've been going through a series this summer on the I AM statements of Jesus that John records in his gospel. We're getting close to the end of this series, and today, as you heard, the passage that we're exploring is where Jesus says, "I AM the true vine."

I wanted to start off by telling you a story. In the late nineties, a film came out entitled *American History X*. Has anyone seen this film? Ok, so some of us have. Here's the basic summary: *American History X* tells the story of a young man whose father was a firefighter and was killed on account of drug violence. And because of his undealt with grief and rage at his dad's death his grief turned into anger, which left him vulnerable to the manipulation of an older man who told him that the way to fight back and be okay was to join in with a group of white supremacists. The young man is, indeed, comforted and finds solace in the midst of a group of others who rage against the world.¹

So whenever I hear stories, whether it's stories of domestic violence, stories about other kinds of violence that we do to one another, in addition to my own grief and pain, one of the questions I often wonder about is: "What happened? What happened and got so broken inside of someone else that they might then inflict violence upon another person?"

I mean, I notice this even in myself. Right now, I'm trying to get a puppy, and Andy, my spouse, who's wonderful, had some questions about this last night. I mean- he had questions about the puppy—questions about how much it might cost. I mean- how can there be any question but how adorable they all are and which one we are taking home?

But when Andy started asking me questions, I noticed this thing inside of me, this part of me who doesn't like being told what to do and experienced pain when I was younger as I felt controlled and manipulated, the part of me who, when pressed, just wants to lash out and be like, "Whatever. I don't care what you think. I just want a puppy." Thankfully, last night, instead of reacting out of my pain I said, "I think we should go to bed and talk about this some more tomorrow." For the truth is that so much of my response and reaction is because Andy was connecting with pain in my own story that makes me then want to defend myself and be protective.

This move towards self-preservation is a normal human response. We all have known different reasons for why we have pain or shame, reasons for why we're afraid that we're unworthy or unlovable. And sometimes these reasons result in us engaging in the world in ways that are profoundly violent and harmful.

¹ Tony Kaye, *American History X* (Hollywood: New Line Cinema, 1998).



Strangely, faith itself can be employed as its own sort of defense, a type of self-preservation designed to keep us safe. And we then lash out of our defenses, but with the shield of God as a sure defense as we think: "If I just attach myself to this God who will then, then that God will smite you." 'Cuz violence is justified if God does it on my behalf, right?

That's one of the ways we can also approach our faith. Faith is the thing that gives us meaning and strength that we believe will prop up our ego and keep us from ever being harmed. And we in the history of the Christian Church have seen some of the legacy and influence of when faith gets employed that way: it leads to genocide, crusades, and religious-based violence. But I'd like to suggest today that there is another way.

The other way of faith, which John again and again invites us into, is one that does not make us strong, but one that, through the encounter and the knowing of the Great I AM births us into new ways of being. This is the way of love, of a love that heals and binds up our wounds, of a Spirit who breathes within our souls and our hearts, inviting us to be the humans that God has fashioned and created and called us each to be.

You may remember earlier this summer, when I first preached on the I AM, I said that there were a couple of significant things about what John is doing by employing the I AM and attributing these sayings to Jesus. One of them is the sense back in the Hebrew Bible, the I AM references to God. When God shows up to Moses in the burning Bush, what does he say? "I AM."

And John, by telling us these "I AM" statements of Jesus is saying: "Hey folks, Jesus is God. Pay attention!" Right?

The second thing I suggested was that by saying, "I AM," it's a reminder that this life of faith and this following of Jesus is an encounter with YHWY- the God who is the ground of being. In the I AM, we're profoundly and continually encountered by God in Jesus, right? God shows up in the burning bush to Moses, and God isn't like, "I AM! Boom! Here's the list of 484 things with the sub-points that you better make sure you believe in. If you don't get them all right, then you're going to go to hell!"

No, God shows up in the burning bush and says, "Take off your sandals, Moses. The ground you're on is holy." The bush doesn't get consumed, and Moses is encountered by God in the midst of the fire who says, "I AM," and Moses' life is changed.

This is the invitation to the way of faith that John is depicting here. An invitation to encounter and be encountered by the love of the Great I AM, who was, and is, and is to come...to be birthed anew and anew by the one who is our source of life, breath, and all things...ionly we can remember and allow ourselves to be encountered by this God.



So today we come to the passage from John 15, "I am the true vine." I want to say a few things about this particular passage as part of the invitation that John is issuing in the entire book. Now, unlike some stories where Jesus tells a parable, or it's a history or an accounting, this is another way of communicating that often appeared in the Jewish texts and community, where there's an image, a metaphor, and a life application.

We do that in sermons, too, right? Image...life application. That's what's going on here in this text. The imagery of the vine was also familiar to the hearers and readers of this text. The vine shows up multiple times in the Jewish scriptures. In Isaiah, and in Ezekiel.

And in this particular passage, God is the wine grower. Jesus is the vine. We are the branches. At the beginning of this passage, it starts out by saying, "I am the true vine." 35 times throughout this book of John, John employs the word **true**. He wants you to really believe. This isn't fake truth, this is the real truth. "Pay attention. I am the **true** vine." I AM the **true** this, the **true** that. John is telling us: Jesus is **true**...and he will tell us again, just in case we haven't been paying attention.

In verse five, John talks about Jesus and the vine as a life source, the place where we go and we discover what true life is really about. As we continue through this passage, if you pay attention, and this is a fun thing you can do on your own: when you go through a passage, just notice if words come up frequently. So throughout just this one passage, the words "**bear fruit**" appear at six times. So clearly bearing fruit is something of importance for John in this passage. He's wanting us to pay attention.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that *bears no fruit*. Every branch that *bears fruit*, he prunes to make it *bear more fruit*. If you have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you, abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot *bear fruit* by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

I am the vine. You are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them *bear much fruit*. Because apart from me, you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers. Such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

My Father is glorified by this, that you *bear much fruit* and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me so I have loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.



This is my commandment: that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer because the servant does not know what the master is doing, but I have called you friends because I have made known to you everything that I've heard from my Father.

You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and **bear fruit**, fruit that will last so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another."

And throughout these 17 verses the word "abide" appears eight times (can you find them?). The word "abide" actually appears 40 times in the book of John. Maybe we should pay attention to that, just maybe.

It's a little bit like how in the movie *Good Will Hunting*, who has seen that one? There's a section of the film where the counselor is sitting down with Will, and he keeps saying to him, "It's not your fault. It's not your fault." And Will's like, "Yeah, yeah. I know." Again, his counselor says: "Will, it's not your fault. It's not your fault. It's not your fault." Finally, Will breaks down.²

It's almost like John knows that we're human too, and so John says, "Hey, abide. No, really, abide." "Yeah, yeah, yeah." "No, abide." Okay, the point here is "ABIDE. "Are you getting annoyed yet? "Abide."

What does it mean to abide? Do you know what it feels like in your body when you're abiding? Think about that. Abide. Abide. Abide.

In this passage, quite interestingly, there are imperatives that tell us **to abide**, **to ask**, and **to bear fruit**. But there's only one command that shows up in this passage, which is part of why I wanted us to read all 17 verses. What's the command? Look at the passage again. Love. The only command in this passage is love. That is actually our only job is truly to love: to abide in that love, to stay present in the face of the burning bush of the encounter with the love of God, and let ourselves be held and shaped and transformed and changed.

A few weeks ago, I got to preach on "I Am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." And in that passage often it's translated as, "In my father's house, there are many rooms." It actually would be better translated as "abiding places." Isn't that cool? There are abiding places that we are called to. The places where we are home.

A friend of mine posted a quote on an Instagram a few weeks ago that read. "Love is what we are born with. Fear is what we have learned here. The spiritual journey is

² Gus Van Sant, *Good Will Hunting* (Los Angeles: Miramax, 1997).



unlearning of fear, and the acceptance of love back into our hearts."³ For me, in so many ways, if I were going to tell the story about the gospel, I would say that what happened is that we were meant to be at home with God, and that somewhere along the way, our souls and our hearts were wounded. And we forgot where we belonged.

And then God reminds us by taking on human form and dwelling in our midst. "Hey folks, you're invited to abide...just come home to love." And that's what Christ invites us, and that of which John reminds us here: That faith isn't the thing that just keeps us from fear. Faith isn't the thing that gives us a list of rules of the 542 things that we're always going to mess up on. No, faith is the call and the invitation to abide in love, and let it change, transform, heal, and make us new. This is a house with room enough, indeed, for each of us. Room for us to abide and bear fruit.

I love that connection: that as we abide, as we know where we're held, it actually does something to the way we show up in, because I know some people in here like some good wine, right? The grape doesn't exist just for itself. Yes, your joy gets complete as a grape, because that's what you're meant to do is grow up and be: a good grape. But the grape, the vine that has known the struggle, right, that's the best kind? Some of you winos are like, "Okay, I'm hearing you now."

The thing with wine is that it is made rich through struggle. The years that the vines have been, continuing to bear more fruit and more fruit, the more rich and complex their grapes become. If you are the vine your only job is to keep on keeping on. And as you abide and rest, as you trust the pruning and tending your branches by the vine dresser, as you are all that you were meant to be, it results in a wonderfully rich fruit that we get to drink and enjoy.

And likewise, that's the point of the work of God in our lives and hearts: as we allow love to heal and transform us, we become a people who bear fruit that makes for amazing wine.

This one of the reasons I'm so excited that this Year of the Good Neighbor, because part of our challenge and invitation and the work we'll be doing together this year is first about abiding. It's starting the questions: Who are we called to be? Do we actually, as a congregation, believe that the love of God in Christ calls and invites and challenges and transforms and heals...even us? And then, how does that abiding love invite us to be people who are good fruit? To be people who live love? Because as we abide, we can't help it, we bear the good fruit of love because we know what it means to have rooted deeply into the love that finds and heals and transforms and redeems us.

I have a key chain. It says "Empowered Women Empower Women."⁴ This is an

³ From Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of a Course in Miracles* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), xxii.

⁴ Purchased on Etsy: https://www.etsy.com/listing/618955036/empowered-women-empower-women?ref=yr_purchases.



example of how abiding allows for the bearing of the fruit of love. For as I have been able to experience the freedom and the grace of being who God has made me to be, I am able to celebrate and foster more soil for more women to be fully all that God has made me them to be. This abiding, this knowing of love only produces more; it makes me want all of the kids in our church to become all that God has made them to be. The lie of the world is that there's not enough for all of us, but in God's economy, in the economy of abiding, there's more than enough abundant fruit at this table for everyone to have enough. And we get to join in that faithful witness throughout all time of the people who have been encountered by this God, who then live differently.

And as we embark on the Year of the Good Neighbor, who better to lead us into that than a man who in so many ways in his life lived the invitation to love God with all that he was and to love his neighbor as himself. And he did it in his own way. Let's watch this trailer this as we think about our invitation to abide and bear fruit.⁵

The call of the great I AM is to abide in this love, to be held by this love, and transformed by this love...a love that invites us, and in fact, I think, allows us to show up differently in the world.

Lutheran theologian and ethicist Dorothee Sölle writes about the way that love transforms our relationship to our faith and to God from one of just obedience of servants, but to one where, as this passage suggests, we're children. We're not ones who are serving some angry God up in the sky, we're ones who are part of this family of God's great love. And this also changes then the way we show up in the world. It moves us, she suggests, to solidarity one with another.⁶

This is where the final quote I wanted to share with you a friend also put up on Instagram (which I clearly never go on). She put up this quote from MLK:

One of the greatest problems of history is that the concepts of love and power are usually contrasted as polar opposites. Love is identified with a resignation of power, and power a denial of love. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive. And that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.⁷

And so, during this year in the Year of the Good Neighbor, we're going to be invited and invite one another, both to abide and to bear fruit. And in a world of

⁵ Morgan Neville, *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* (Universal City, CA: Focus Features, 2018).

⁶ Dorothee Sölle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2001), 36.

⁷ Martin Luther King Jr., "Where Do We Go From Here?," Address Delivered at the Eleventh Annual SCLC Convention (Atlanta, GA): August 16, 1967. Accessed online at: <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/where-do-we-go-here-address-delivered-eleventh-annual-sclc-convention>.



partisanship, we're going to be challenging each other, what does it mean to be church? What does it mean to live in this love of God? In a way that shows up for our neighbors, in a way that we show up for one another, in a way that we allow ourselves to let God show up in our own lives.

We're called to abide. Let us abide.

God loves you. Abide.

Abide.

Abide.

And may the God of all love, heal, and change and transform and empower us to be a people who love our neighbors as we know ourselves loved, bearing this fruit.

Are you in? I heard that amen. May we indeed be a people who abide and be good neighbors together as we live love. Amen.

12 So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all God's ways, to love God, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, 13 and to keep the commandments of the Lord your God and God's decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being. 14 Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God, and the earth with all that is in it, 15 yet God's heart has been set in love on your ancestors alone, and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today. 16 Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. 17 For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, 18 who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. 19 You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. 20 You shall fear the Lord your God; God alone you shall worship; to God you shall hold fast, and by God's name you shall swear. 21 God is your praise; God is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen. 22 Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons; and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars in heaven.

Welcome & Prayer

Well, good morning! It's good to see you all on this cozy, rainy, Sunday morning as we gather together to worship. As we continue, will you join me in prayer?

Oh God of Abraham and Isaac; God of Hagar and Sarah: thank you for being the God of our lives. Thank you for being the one who throughout time has loved all people and who has also invited and called us to be your own. May we remember this love, and may it change us. It's in your name that we gather and prayer...Amen.

Sermon: "Strangers in the Land"

I was going to start my sermon with something that I have now moved to second position because in this **Year of the Good Neighbor**, I have another story I now want to begin with.

I ran into Hazel this morning and she said that she liked my dress. I replied: "Well, it's actually my neighbors!" It's true! You see, the downfall of having a man as your spouse is that you can't steal his clothing (am I right?!). If any of you had sisters or female roommates before, you're all

like (to your male partner, if you have one): “Seriously, your clothes don’t help me.” So my neighbor had on a really fun dress yesterday and I asked if I could borrow it for today and she was like, “Yes! Sure, absolutely!” I share that just as a fun story of how my neighbor is really a great neighbor!

One of the things that I love about what Hazel’s comment brought to light is what happens when you have an idea or an invitation before you, such as our invitation to be good neighbors, and you begin to notice it pop up in many places in your life. And that is one of the invitations to us this fall as we are reflecting upon and praying about what it means to be good neighbors—that we would notice where God’s love shows up in our lives through our neighbors and where those small opportunities for us to be good neighbors is clear too. Maybe it’s sharing a dress with your neighbor...or not...just depends!

But here’s the thing about being neighbors...many of us actually learned when we were very young that we were supposed to be afraid of folks we don’t know. And there are good reasons for this. When I was in elementary school, Jacob Wetterling was abducted, shattering the innocence of communities in relationship to the safety they could trust in their neighborhoods.¹

I was little when that happened, and I don’t remember a lot about it except for that I remember the grown-ups being really afraid, and I remember that at school we started being taught about how we are supposed to engage with grown-ups who we don’t know in terms of learning about “stranger danger”. Quite honestly, I am grateful for this education in many ways because when I was in second grade there was a man who attempted multiple abductions of kids in and around Hudson, Wisconsin who was going around and inviting kids and his van. One day when I was walking home from school he stopped his van and called out to me, “Hey, little girl, come here. I have something to show you.” I knew what I was supposed to do... I wasn’t supposed to talk to him because he was a stranger and I ran directly to my house.

I’m grateful for what I learned about being safe, but sometimes we internalize these early “stranger danger” teachings—rightly so because we want our kids and ourselves to stay safe—but it leads to put up walls with strangers even in our adult lives...in ways we don’t need to.

¹ For a history see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_of_Jacob_Wetterling.

And this morning I want to talk about our invitation to love our neighbors with *flesh on*. What I mean by this is that we can probably all agree in theory, right? *Love God. Love Neighbors*. We all think, “Yep. Totally- I’m on board!” Loving God and Neighbor is easy in theory, but I want to talk about it in an *actual context*, first the of Deuteronomy, so as to then talk about it in the *actual context* of our lives, and the *actual context* of our church.

To do so, let me begin with a little bit of context.

Welcome to the book Deuteronomy! (Aren’t you excited?!) Now you know you’re in trouble!

Okay so here’s the deal: random fact that you probably don’t know is that when I was in seminary I worked as a T.A. (teaching assistant) for one of our Old Testament professors, and I was tasked with editing his commentary on Deuteronomy. In the midst of this project, I got hit by a Hummer (yes, my car got totaled) and I had a brain injury so I would fall asleep while I was reading my professors commentary (which I realize some people do in reading Deuteronomy even without having brain injuries...but I digress).

But in truth, I love this book and I want to let you know a few things about it. The first thing I want to point out is the **title** Deuteronomy is based upon a Greek translation of the title, which is a mistranslation of the phrase “a copy of this law”, which should have actually have been translated as “second law”. Yet the *actual* title of this book in Hebrew is “words” because the compiled text is understood to be the record of the words of Moses right before the people are about to move into the promised land.²

Some commentators break this book down into three different sections of speeches of Moses as the people of Israel are right on the precipice of the promised land having been on the journey through the wilderness after they got out of slavery and now they’re about to go in the land...these speeches then are the instructions for how they are supposed to live as they actually come into the land.

Commentators disagree (shockingly) about when exactly this book came into its final form, but we know that it was clearly utilized in the life of the Jewish people as a means to really wrestle with what it is to be

² So much of this section comes from the work of Dr. Carolyn Pressler and my notes from her class at United Seminary “Older Testament in the Life of the Church.”

the people of God, what it means to be faithful, and who they are called 688 to be in relationship to this YHWH God.

Now a little bit about the **context** and the **occasion** for the book. As I said earlier, Deuteronomy narrates the moments before the Israelites are about to cross over into the promised land. It's an authoritative book, but it's not particularly authoritarian; it's about the fundamental relationship that Israel is supposed to have with YHWH. All of the laws and commands that you read about in the pages of Deuteronomy are about reminding the people that their relationship with YHWH God is and is to be the center of all things.

So when the text says, "Hey don't do this or that..." so much of that is about making clear that as they move into the new land that they are Yahweh's people; what's central to all of the **words** of this book is the **challenge and invitation to the people that they remember that the center of their entire being, their entire life, and their entire community is supposed to be YHWH God.** Deuteronomy calls to them: "Do not forget, because you are going to be tempted to forget when you move into the land... and oh, by the way, here are some ways that you can help yourself to not forget (which goes on for chapters of the book)."

This text also aims to encourage the people to take up the responsibility to live out a particular way of being in relationship with YHWH God. Now here's one of the things that I think is really cool (and I hope you get really excited about it too!): The thing that you might not know about Deuteronomy is that Deuteronomy is put together in a way that reflects and mirrors the covenantal treaties that would have existed at that time in the Ancient Near East.³

Why is that really cool, Sara? (in case you didn't already think that)

³ Though Deuteronomy is not shaped as a treaty in its final form, the elements of the Suzerainty Treaty are present. Carolyn Pressler argues that the "treaty form influenced its authors. It may even have had the shape of a divine-human treaty earlier in its history (an earlier draft). PDM calls the suzerainty treaty the "submerged structure" of Deuteronomy." The elements of a treaty between an overlord and vassal include: (a) Preamble. The sovereign identifies himself. (b) Historical Prologue. The sovereign describes the benevolent acts he has done for the sake of the vassal people. (c) Treaty stipulations. (d) Provision for depositing the treaty in a temple and for periodic readings of it (this is optional). (e) References to witnesses and (f) Blessings and curses. All are present in Deuteronomy.

Here's why I think this is so cool. Given that this book takes the standard 689 elements of a treaty and the people, it then can be read like a treaty or a covenant between God and God's people. As such, it's a way to make clear that it is not an external king—the promise of God isn't for a king like David or Solomon—that's not the point. The point for the people of God is that the only true King EVER is YHWH God. The one that we are primary relationship with the people is supposed to be YHWH. **Period.**

And the book of Deuteronomy calls to them (and us): “As you go into the the land **do not forget** because you're going tempted to become like the other people, to want to King to rule you. But don't forget though that YHWH alone is King.”

You know how Christians often say, “Jesus is Lord.” This language echoes what is happening in Deuteronomy, and is found in the language of the early church and in Jesus' own words...**to say that “Jesus is the Lord” means Caesar isn't.** This is why the early church was accused of being insurrectionists and the like because they would always affirm that first allegiance always belongs to God.

That of course doesn't mean that there weren't still Jews and Gentiles in the early church. This doesn't mean that today there aren't Americans and Germans and Swedes. **But it does mean that we can't ever forget that the center of our being as people who claim the name of Christ is that we are Christian.** That the one with whom we are in fundamental relationship with, to whom we owe our loyalty to isn't Barack Obama or Donald Trump. It's to God.

And sometimes we, just like the folks back in Deuteronomy, forget. This theme of remembrance and forgetting is present throughout all of Scripture, but particularly we see this so much in the Jewish prophets... remembrance is such a central theme because we are human and we forget.

We forget how God shown up in our lives. We forget the healing mercies that God has bestowed on us. There are big monsters in our lands too and we get afraid! We, like the people of Israel, clamor for power that will make us feel more safe, and yet the King comes on a donkey and says “I came to bring peace...” **And when we live from that place of peace, that place of right relationship, that place of knowing that we are God's chosen people-- beloved by God-- it changes how we can be neighbors to one another. It animates a particular way of being, and that is central to what is going on in this text: YHWH God, the one was brought them out of slavery, calls to them (and us): “Hear oh Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one, and you shall love this God**

with all of your being...it is from this place that neighbor love begins and ends and finds its meaning.⁴ 690

And so we come to this particular text in Deuteronomy 10:12-22. This text comes at the end of a section in Deuteronomy where the call to covenantal loyalty has been issued, starting back in chapter six with the passage I just referenced above. And it wraps up here in chapter 10 before we go into the next section of the book.

The call to commitment is transpiring as we see in verse 12: “And now, oh Israel, what does the Lord require of you?” Do you remember the text from Micah 6:8? Does that sound a little familiar? “Now, what does the Lord require?” This is basically the same question in Deuteronomy as in Micah. Micah calls us to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.” Here in Deuteronomy, this passage which would have been written on the hearts and minds of the people of Israel, they are called to only fear the Lord your God (I’m in verse 12), to walk in God’s ways, to love God, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and your soul, and to keep the commands that the Lord your God and God’s decrees that I am commanding you today...and I love this last clause—“for your own well-being.”

This passage isn’t about laws, just to give you the law. These laws are because this is what is good for you and the Lord your God who brought you out of slavery, the God who has created you, the God who loves you! This is for your good! Choose life, cries God through the book of Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy wants Israel to choose life--to choose the way of YHWY--and to remember and trust this love. Moving into verse 14 and 15, here it reads: “Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God, and the earth with all that is in it.” This is again asserting that even though there may be other gods that people worship in the land, there might be other kings, **the ONE who is above all is YHWH.**

Everything belongs to and is under the reign of YHWH. Verse 15: “yet God’s heart has been set in love on your ancestors alone, and chosen you” (as God’s people). Could you imagine what an amazing promise this would be when you’re about to go into a land that feels terrifying, or when you come back from captivity, to be reminded that no matter what it looks like this God is actually for you?! This is the remembrance that is set before them.

⁴ From Deuteronomy 4:6-9.

But here's the really cool thing that I love about the story of God's work 691 in relationship to Israel: going back to the book of Genesis, the promise didn't end with them. The promise was always supposed to be for all the people. So if you go forward to the last verse of this section of Deuteronomy 10, verse 22 says "your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons, and they were enslaved, and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars in the heavens." The promise of the decedents being as numerous as the stars is given in Genesis 26: "One day your descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the heavens." So going back even to Genesis, there is a very clear picture that by choosing Israel as God's people, through Israel God was going to bless the entire world, and through this initial relationship the whole world would come to know YHWH God.

In view of who this God is (going back to verse 16), they are called to circumcise their hearts. Circumcision was about identifying who you were, of making clear that you were people who were set apart. Going back in Deuteronomy, which Jesus harkens back as he preaches in the Sermon on the Mount that it's not about the external but about our hearts. He is challenging that it's always been about us being in right relationship with God. "So don't be stubborn! Common!" The text cries out to its hearers: "God isn't partial; this God doesn't take bribes (verse 18); executes justice for the orphans and the widow, and loves the stranger... you also should do this for you yourself were strangers in the land of Egypt." Rather it challenges: In view of this history and God's faithfulness to you, this is how you're supposed to live.

So that's a little bit about the **actual context** of Deuteronomy, let me and us now turn to the **actual context** of our lives and our time as we consider how we might be invited to love our neighbors not in theory but with *flesh on*.

I titled this sermon "Strangers in the Land" because I wanted to talk about our actual context—our current political moment.

UGH (deep breath). These conversations are really hard right now, right? I'm sure for some of you in seeing my sermon title you were a bit worried about what might happen this morning, so thank you all for showing up.

Here's my concern: that sometimes in our current political moment we hear the word "stranger" from Deuteronomy and it's SO laden with baggage. You might have heard the sermon title and thought: "Oh! It's a liberal agenda that's going to get preached on Sunday!" Or maybe you read the sermon title and you were like: "Sara better bring it on Sunday!"

My concern as a pastor, which I think resonates with Deuteronomy, is that I want us to be a people who while yes, we are obviously living in our current moment and in our current time-- there is no way you can't be influenced by culture (you speak English! Maybe other languages too)—these things are all a part of shaping you. The majority of us in this room are American citizens. Many of us have deep and profound love for our country. You love your family. Maybe you like pop music (maybe you don't). All of these things are true and have and do shape you, **BUT** central to who we are called to be is that we are called to be a people who have one king and one God and one love, we are one body...and that is Christ.

And what concerns me is that sometimes these other things become the first thing accidentally or instead of our central calling to have God be at the center. And my hope and my prayer is that as we wrestle with what it means to be a good neighbor that we come back to the text--that we wrestle with it together, that we ask questions...

What does it mean to not forget?

What does it mean that we are called throughout Scripture to care for the widow, the orphan, the stranger?

Sometimes we can too easily we conflate these calls into particular partisan positions...but please, let's be intentional about letting the Gospel and the good news of this life that Christ calls us to, to offer us invitation, reminder, and critique.

We aren't going to agree about what to do about borders. We aren't going to agree about a whole lot of things. When in the life of this church have we ever agreed about everything? We disagree. GREAT! Welcome to community! Welcome to being in relationship.

It is through this wrestling that we can become better, right? Iron sharpens iron. So let's be better Christians together.

Let's be people who wrestle with these texts, acknowledging that there are some positions that can't be defended. As a Christ-follower; I don't get to say: "Kill everybody." Not an option, folks. I would pretty much have to throw out all of the Bible if I say that.

We are called to love the stranger. We are called to love the widow (and widower). We are called to love the orphan. Scripture makes this clear. I mean we could go on for quite a while here. We could talk about

Colossians 3:11,⁵ Hebrews 11:1-3,⁶ Matthew 25:40,⁷ Luke 10:27;⁸ Zechariah 7:9-10;⁹ Ezekiel 47:22;¹⁰ Psalm 146:9;¹¹ 1 Chronicles 16:19-22;¹² Leviticus 19:34;¹³ Deuteronomy 10:19...our passage today...amongst others.¹⁴

⁵ In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all. Colossians 3:11

⁶ Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. Hebrews 13:1-3

⁷ Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of my brethren you did it to me. Matthew 25:40

⁸ You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself. Luke 10:27

⁹ Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another. Zechariah 7:9-10

¹⁰ You shall allot it as an inheritance for yourselves and for the aliens who reside among you and have begotten children among you. They shall be to you as citizens of Israel; with you they shall be allotted an inheritance among the tribes of Israel. Ezekiel 47:22

¹¹ The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. Psalm 146:9

¹² When they were few in number, of little account, and strangers in the land, wandering from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another people, he allowed no one to oppress them; he rebuked kings on their account, saying, 'Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm.' 1 Chronicles 16:19-22

¹³ The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God. Leviticus 19:34

¹⁴ 'Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow.' Then all the people shall say, 'Amen!' (Leviticus 27:19) I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy, and I championed the cause of the stranger. I broke the fangs of the unrighteous, and made them drop their prey from their teeth. (Job 29:15-17) For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever. (Jeremiah 7:5-7) I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. (Matthew 25:35) Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. (Acts 10:34) Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. (Romans 12:13)

I say this just say our first call as people who love this God, is to put this God first. To let this text and the story of God in the midst of God's people be something that invites and critiques us to see things differently, to wrestle together with what it means to love our neighbors as ourselves, to seek to be the people in the land... in our land, and in our time who are so clearly the people of God.

That is my prayer, and that is my hope.

One of my favorite theologians, Johann Baptist Metz, lived through Nazi Germany; he was actually conscripted into the Nazi military as a teenager right at the end of the war. He spent the rest of his life wrestling with what it means to be Christian in view of the Shoa. What does it mean to claim the name Christ in view of the way that Christianity has been complicit in evil in our world? One of the things he talked about was how the cross is always supposed to function as a critique of the ways that we live. And I mean, I want the cross to critique me! I want this God of love to call to me: "Sara, you missed it." I want us as community to challenge one another; I want you to challenge me when I get locked into a particular narrative when I am sure I have all of the truth.

I want to be a person, and I want us to be a people who go back to these texts and remember that the greatest commandment according to Jesus is to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves...and we then let that stand in both invitation and critique to all of us to be the people of God in our time.

Yes, we will disagree about what to do about borders. But praying for the well-being of migrant kids (and their parents) shouldn't be a question for us. How exactly we are going to do that? What policies do we think we need to have? We are going to disagree-- great. Let's wrestle together with those challenges, but never forgetting that our and my first loyalty isn't to a political party, no- I am and we are first a people who have claimed the name of Jesus. And I want to live in fidelity to *that* kingdom's coming. That is our kingdom. The kingdom of YHWH God.

I want us to be those people.

I get it...this is hard.

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- Love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. Romans 13:10

And this is messy.

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You're a Republican? Great. Be a Jesus Republican.
You're a Democrat? Fine. Be a Jesus Democrat.
You're a Green Party person? Great. Be a Jesus Green Party person.
Be a purple party...I don't care!

What I care about is: is your faith the center thing that you allow to invite and critique who you are and who we are being?

Deuteronomy stands in prophetic invitation to us to say, "Hey Colonial Church, hear this: "The Lord your God, the Lord is one. And you should love this God with everything. And oh, by the way- don't forget. Don't forget how I've shown up in your life. Don't forget the healing work I've done in your midst. Live from this place of remembrance so that you can live in resonance with this invitation to circumcise your hearts, to live in loving relationship with the God who is the Lord of all. To be the people who don't take bribes, but join God in the execution of justice of the orphan and the widow and the stranger, providing them food and clothing because we remember and because we pray and long for the day when indeed, those who know this great love of God are, indeed, far more numerous than the stars."

This is the year of the Good Neighbor.

To be good neighbors asks us to be Christians who allow ourselves to be transformed by the Spirit of God. **It's the gospel with flesh on.**

Remember. There is one God. And there is one King and there is one Lord of all.

So if you are in, if you are in to wrestle together. Even as it's hard, then let's do this work together.

Let's go into the new land. Remembering who we are. And remembering from whence we've come.

For we are to love the Lord our God with all of our hearts and all of our souls and all of our minds. And we are to love our neighbor...and even the stranger...as ourselves.

For we were once strangers... in fact, we still are...a little strange.

So amen. Amen.



On Being a Bad Neighbor

Genesis 16

16 Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, 2 and Sarai said to Abram, "You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. 3 So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife. 4 He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. 5 Then Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!" 6 But Abram said to Sarai, "Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her.

7 The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. 8 And he said, "Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai." 9 The angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her." 10 The angel of the Lord also said to her, "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude." 11 And the angel of the Lord said to her,

*"Now you have conceived and shall bear a son;
you shall call him Ishmael,
for the Lord has given heed to your affliction.*

*12 He shall be a wild ass of a man,
with his hand against everyone,
and everyone's hand against him;
and he shall live at odds with all his kin."*

13 So she named the Lord who spoke to her, "You are El-roi"; for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" 14 Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

*15 Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael.
16 Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him[e] Ishmael.*

-Genesis 16, NRSV



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Let's pray together.

Oh God who sees us, as we turn our gaze and our hearts and our lives towards Thanksgiving and Advent, God, may we find ourselves more deeply seen and known by you. May we, indeed, find our place in your good and healing story. Give us courage to see the complexities within our own hearts, and God heal us that we might be your people and that we might truly love you and love our neighbors as ourselves. Amen.

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Well, good morning. Are you ready for Genesis 16? The sermon title this morning is "On Being a Bad Neighbor." If you didn't already gather this from hearing the reading, this text is rife with complexity, and I want us to talk about that complexity this morning.

Why a sermon on being a bad neighbor? You see, in this year of the good neighbor, it's easy to tell stories each other stories about being a good neighbor, to celebrate good neighbors like those in Mr. Rodger's neighborhood, and to imagine ourselves as decently good neighbors, right? We're not terrible neighbors, just neighbors in process of becoming good. Yet actuality of our lives and our neighborliness is that it, like this story in Genesis, is more fraught and more complex than we often want to admit or talk about.

So, to talk about being a bad neighbor, I wanted to start by talking a bit about one of our core values: "Welcome, beloved."

I'll never forget on Kick-Off Sunday last year when we were sharing about our core values what Carol Wachter said about "Welcome, Beloved." She named "welcome, Beloved" as that space where you are known and seen and loved...just as you are. To my mind, the notion of *being seen* is one of the most central concepts to understanding what it means to be loved.

Let me say more about this...you've heard me talk about that part of the reason I chose to marry Andy Garbers was because he always saw me and he always heard me.

For so many of us, we have spent much of our lives terrified of being seen for who we really are. We build up defenses, for good reasons—on account of earlier rejection or shaming—sure that if others know who we really are then they won't love us anymore, right? We bear the scars and pain of what has happened when we've



shown up in our truth and have been betrayed...so we want to be invisible. We gussy up our stories, and put Instagram filters on our wrinkles, hoping that the other won't see things about us that we think are ugly and beyond the pale of love. And yet we feel alone and rejected because we aren't know. But love, when love truly enters, it sees us, it knows all of who we are and says to us with that gaze of love in its eyes, "I like you just the way you are." Maybe this is part of why Fred Rogers continues to resonate so much with folks, right? What did he do? He'd get down on the level of kids, look them in the eye and say, "It's you I like, just the way you are." He saw them. And that seeing was the ultimate embodiment of love.

That same kind of seeing is the fundamental act that the God of Hagar and Abram and Sarai also evidenced. It's the place where we are welcome as beloved, where we are seen.

And yet we live in a world where most of us know what it feels like to not be seen. For some of you as you've aged, you know what it is to become more invisible in your workplace. For some of you, you know what it's felt like to remember when you were a young, attractive woman, and now you wonder if you still are worth looking at. For some of you, it was like things that you were super nerdy about, like Star Trek or Star Wars, and you don't want to let people know you're super into it. Anybody? It's not me, but there's these parts of our story... Oh there, I saw that hand. Thank you.

We know what it is to not be seen. And while we can come together this Year of the Good Neighbor and say, "Yes, of course...let's be good neighbors!" it's much more challenging to actually be good neighbors. We can all (and should) affirm that we should be good neighbors, that we ought to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. Yet the reality of human history and even of the church, let alone our own lives, all tells us that *actually* being good neighbors is a lot more complicated. I know this from my own story; I know there are people who would say I haven't been a good neighbor to them. I have often failed at being a good neighbor: I haven't seen people, I've been afraid, or so in my own story and dealing with my own stuff that I wasn't actually loving them as I should.

The notion of love as being seen, and recognition as central to our ability to fulfill the greatest commandment and live out a neighbor ethic that respects human rights and dignity, is a major reason as to why I ended up doing a doctorate in ethics. I've told the story before about how when I was in junior high, I learned about World War II and Nazi Germany, and I could not understand how humans could do such violence to one another. I was the kid who came to faith on account of John 3:16, and thought: "God made everybody, God loves everybody. How could there be a Holocaust?" It blew (and still blows) my mind. Could anything fly more directly in the face of love of neighbor than the egregious horror of genocide? I didn't understand how someone



could see the person before them and not see them as human.¹

Yet the actuality of our lives, and of history, is that not seeing the other before us happens in ways great and small. But if we are to be Christian in the world, we must be people who seek to see and cognize the other before us at all times as we strive to be people who are good neighbors, following after this God, being the answer to Christ's prayer, that God's kingdom would come.

And in preaching on being a bad neighbor, I wanted to be sure we spend at least one week in this sermon series acknowledging that to *actually* be good neighbors is hard work. Our stories are complex, and sometimes we're really bad at seeing. Likewise, though the call of the Bible is to see our neighbors as we ourselves are and have been seen by God, there are plenty of stories in the Bible like the one in Genesis 16 that make clear the all too frequent failure of our vision and our ability to live out the ethic of neighbor love.

As I move into the passage, I want to acknowledge a few places and people to whom I am indebted to in crafting this sermon. You'll see some of these on the screen. Their voices are important to me because honestly even though I grew up in church and read the Bible a lot I cannot remember ever hearing about Hagar, really hearing about Hagar.

That is, until I started listening to my friends and scholars from the African-American community. Indeed, the first person who pressed me to examine Hagar was a black woman from my former church who, when I was going to preach on Genesis and talk about Abram and Sarai's journey, asked me if I was going to talk about Hagar. My face surely reflected my lack of knowledge for why I should do so, and she said... "You know Hagar is one of the most important stories in the Bible for Black women, right? You've been taught to just focus on Sarai because you're a white woman, but we black women know the story from the perspective of the slave woman."

I took her challenge as an invitation (and a deep reflection on how our location and identity effects how we read the Bible, and why it's important to read diverse voices) and began to read commentaries on Hagar, particularly the work of womanist author

¹ Recognition Theory is a significant field of study inside of ethics. Much work arose out of the ashes of the Shoah as scholars sought to make sense of the genocide. See, for instance: Axel Honneth, "Recognition: Invisibility: On the epistemology of 'recognition'," *Aristotelian Society Supplementary* 75:1 (2001): 111-126. Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1995). Simon Thompson, *The Political Theory of Recognition: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006). Paul Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition*, trans. David Pellauer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2005). Hille Haker, "Misrecognition and Recognition—A Necessary Conversation Between Critical Theory and Phenomenology," *8th International Critical Theory Conference of Rome* (May 2015). Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesene Press, 1998). Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2001).



Wil Gafney and her book *Womanist Midrash*.² Another one of my teachers has been the book *Hagar, Sarah and Their Children*.³ This, along with Stephanie Spencer's work at 40 Orchards (Stephanie leads our Scripture Circles and she's also going to speak at the Women's Christmas brunch, small plug) have both opened new space for me to look at Genesis 16.⁴ I will also be pulling from white theologian Walter Brueggemann's *Genesis* commentary, and Toni Morrison's book *Song of Solomon* which features a character named Hagar.⁵ I wanted to note these voices and people because so much of what I'm going to talk about is very indebted to them.

The reason I didn't know about Hagar, or really hadn't read this text much, let alone heard a sermon about it has something to do with being white and living in a world where we tend to tell hero stories, and identify with the hero or central actor of the story.

Abram and Sarai are central to our faith. Throughout the Bible we read that we are the children of Abram; we are children of the promise; we are from Sarai, not Hagar. So the stories I know and grew up hearing about were about Abram and Sarai...how they are the people of God and then Jesus makes us part of the people of God, and so here we are today, right? I mean, it's a great story! But it's not the whole story...and if we are going to live and tell true stories, then we need to tend to the complex story that makes for the story of the promise. If you want to, you can follow along with me in your Bible.

In Genesis YHWH appears to Abram and says to him, "Hey, here's the promise. You are blessed to be a blessing." And he is called out from his land, along with his family. By the way, Sarai and Abram, they're their siblings, just a note. They're called out from their land and they begin to travel to find the land where God is calling them, where God will fulfill God's promise to them. They end up in Egypt because there was a famine. The journey to Egypt happens many times in the Bible and this turn to Egypt when there is famine will happen again in the Hebrew Scriptures. When they get to Egypt, Abram is like, "Oh my goodness. Sarai, you're like super beautiful, and the Pharaoh is going to kill us, so just pretend that we're not married, tell them that you're my sister and everything will be good."

So Sarai ends up though being taken into the Pharaoh's house, which means she

² Wilda C. Gafney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017).

³ Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell, eds., *Hagar, Sarah and Their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006). Also, see: Katharine Dobb Sakenfeld, "Sarah and Hagar: Power and Privileges (Gen 16:1-16; 21:1-21)," in *Just Wives? Stories of Power and Survival in the Old Testament and Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003). And Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984).

⁴ To learn more about 40 Orchards, see: <https://40orchards.org>.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching series (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982). Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004).



becomes part of his harem. Well, eventually Pharaoh figures out that Sarai is actually married to Abram, and then basically... (I mean, we don't know this for sure from the text), but I kind of think he's like, "Oh my goodness, I took a married man's wife. This is not good. Take some stuff and get out. Go, go, go, go!" And God is faithful in getting them out and keeping them safe. So they go out from Egypt (we are now in chapter 13) and they journey from there to the land. Some stuff happens with Lot (we're in chapter 14)...let's keep going (this is how I read the Bible really fast). Some other stuff happens. We'll keep going.

Chapter 15: God shows up again and makes it clear that the promise is not just "blessed to be a blessing," but it's that their descendants will be as numerous as the stars. Now keep in mind that at this point, Abram is in his 70s. Sarai is only 10 years younger. In our present time you are labeled as "advanced maternal age" at 35... Sarai was far beyond that. They don't have any kids, but have been told that they're going to have them and, in fact, that their descendants will be as numerous as the stars. And Abram's like, "Okay, sure God, definitely possible (sarcasm)."

Chapter 16: I'll come more back to this in a minute, but this is the text we're focusing on today. The story continues on after this chapter however, and basically what happens is that eventually (spoiler alert) Abram and Sarai do conceive and have a son named Isaac who figures prominently in the Jewish history and community.

We get to chapter 21. By now I'm on page 18 (for those following along in the pew Bible); if you can speed read, congratulations! Isaac is born, he gets circumcised (circumcision is the evidence of that they're the people of God). Ishmael also is circumcised. And basically, some bad stuff happens, Sarai gets jealous and again kicks Hagar out like she did in chapter 16. So God shows up again and Ishmael is saved.

We come to chapter 25, which now is on page 23. Abram dies. The end. Okay. Oh, I forgot the other part where Abram for a second time gives his wife Sarai to another person and pretends that he's not married to her. So...that happens. Fin.

Why am I doing subjecting you to a fly through of Genesis this morning? Don't worry, it's not because I dislike you. No, it's because I want to remind us that this story is a really complicated story...and if we just gloss over it in a quest to tell a really great, happy story, we fail to do justice to the complexity of how God shows up in real people's lives, just like God does in our stories. So I wanted us to talk a little bit about the larger, complicated story. Now, let us turn more deeply back Genesis 16. You can follow along if you'd like.

We start off in 16, and again what we know about Sarai, which we've learned about her before, is that she can't conceive a baby; she doesn't have any kids. She had an Egyptian slave-girl who they had evidently received when they were in Egypt and was sent along with them. Now, it was a common practice at the time that when someone couldn't conceive, they would actually have another woman in the



household (another wife or slave) take their place in order to have a child who would continue the patriarchal family line. Interestingly through, in this text, it's not just that Hagar is a slave, a concubine, as sometimes it gets translated...she's actually a wife, a second wife. Sarai elevates Hagar so that the child could actually be the heir to the promise. Now this wasn't the promise God had given, for it was supposed to be through Sarai and Abram.

But Sarai was like, "All right, we've got to figure this out. I'm really old. It's not happening. Come on, here we go. Take Hagar." I want to note here that even though what Sarai did to Hagar was common practice at the time, that doesn't dismiss the fact that what's going on in the text is that Hagar is an enslaved woman who's given to a man, not by her own choice. That's complicated, it's real, and it's not ok then even if it is in line with the cultural norms for it is a violation of the image of God in Hagar. Hagar is given to Abram by Sarai ends up conceiving. And at this point the text says, "Hagar looks with contempt on her mistress." The word in Hebrew is better understood as Hagar looks at Sarai like she's a lightweight; she's of little account. Which, in this society would have been true: Sarai's not being able to conceive made her without value in her society; a worthless lightweight.

A lot of commentators interpret this interplay as being about the natural rivalry between women in a society where the majority of your worth and identity was predicated on if you could conceive or not. Another way to read this though is through the perspective of an enslaved woman's contempt towards another woman who has mistreated her and used her a sex slave for her husband. We so often roll right over moments like this in the Bible, and it behooves us to read more slowly so that we don't skip over the suffering and injustice in stories during our time either. So, pause here: imagine how you'd feel towards another woman if she had enslaved you and then made you a sex slave, a forced baby maker? Has anyone seen *Handmaid's Tale*, or read the story? The story of Hagar, Sarai, and Abram makes me think a lot about the dynamics in *Handmaid's Tale*.⁶ It may be that Hagar looks at Sarai with contempt because she's like, "Look what you did to me. You're not treating me as a person. You're not seeing me." And it is so bad that Hagar ends up running away, risking her life so that even if she dies, she dies in freedom.

In verse seven then, we're told that the angel of the Lord finds Hagar by a spring of water. In Hebrew, what is translated here as "spring of water" is the same word for eye; she is found by the "fountain by an eye" in Hebrew, in the wilderness. This notion of the "God who sees" is already starting to come into view. Sarai doesn't see Hagar. Abram, he doesn't see Hagar. They have mistreated and abused her and refused to acknowledge the image of God in Hagar. But Hagar, she goes to the wilderness and is **seen**.

The wilderness figures prominently throughout the texts of our tradition. The

⁶ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (New York: Anchor Books, 1998). The book provides the initial storyline and characters for the recent Hulu series: *The Handmaid's Tale* (Hulu, 2017-Present).



wilderness is a place where God shows up, where you hear from God and are changed, and indeed in this place, God shows up to Hagar. Interestingly, as the messenger of God shows up to Hagar, this is one of the only times in scripture, the messenger doesn't say, "Fear not." Now, we don't know why. Maybe it's because she's already pretty afraid. She gets to see God, which the Bible says no one can do and live. And yet here she does: she sees God and she actually lives and finds release from the abuse and fear in which she had been living.

So she's there in the desert at this fountain by an eye because she's run away. And she is asked, "From where are you fleeing?" She replies, "I'm running away from my mistress, Sarai." She is told to return to her mistress and submit to her. I want to note here that this text has been utilized in the history of slavery, even in our own country, when enslaved persons would run away to say, "See, we have an evidence in scripture of that slaves should return." I would argue that that is a profound misapplication of this passage. We see what happens is what would happen to this woman who has nothing. She's in the wilderness and she's pregnant. God shows up to her and says, "Go back so that you won't die out here and can live." And eventually we see in chapter 23 through her son, she ends up having a life and a future for herself.

Oof-- this is complex, right? This isn't an easy part of Scripture with which to deal. This isn't as wonderful to read as John 3:16, right? This doesn't feel like "God is love."

So Hagar goes back. But she goes returns, held in a promise: "I will so greatly multiply your offspring, that they cannot be counted for multitude." She is given a promise like Abram was given, but she, as the woman by herself is given this promise by God's messenger (whereas the earlier promise wasn't given to Sarai but to Abram). Hagar is told in verse 11 that she shall conceive and bear a son. This sounds very familiar to passage that we know and read during the Christmas season, where the angel appears to Mary. "You have conceived and shall bear a son and you shall call him Ishmael, which means God hears. For God has indeed given heed to your affliction."

Now, interestingly, the translation that we read in the NRSV says how basically Ishmael will be at odds with all of his brothers. This is one of those moments to think about the complexities of the histories that exist between Israel and Iraq and Iran; between the Jewish, Muslim, and Christian traditions, because Ishmael indeed figures prominently, as does Hagar, in the Muslim tradition. But when we go back to the actual Hebrew, what is translated as "at odds" doesn't necessarily mean that they will live at odds. In a recent 40 Orchards study, Stephanie Spencer noted that actually a way to understand this is "the hand of all will be in him and his hand in all. And he will be in the face, in the presence of his brothers is where he shall dwell."

So another way to read this is that they were supposed to be in community with one another as siblings. Why then has it been translated as an assumption that there was always going to be tension? Might that be because of our own histories and desire to



make sense of conflict?

Let's move then in verse 13 where God speaks with Hagar. Do you know that this is the first time in the Bible that someone names God? In fact, it is one of the only moments where this happens. Hagar *names* God, she calls God "El Roi," "the God who sees". And she names the place as "the well of the living one who sees me." She goes back, she bears Ishmael and the story continues from there, but her life has been changed because an unseen, violated woman is seen by the one who sees all things and, in that seeing, makes life possible for all suffering ones.

In telling this complicated story, I am doing so because in this particular moment in our world, it's easy to tell uncomplicated stories. I was joking with Jeff the other day because he's a boomer and I'm a millennial. And recently on Twitter there's been a hashtag #okayboomer. Have any of you heard about this? It's basically that whenever a boomer person says something that is out of touch, racist, or annoying, millennials and Gen-Z folks will dismissively respond: "Okay boomer." In so doing, it sidelines them and their (very often in the case of most of the tweets) problematic positions and perspectives. We were really good at telling uncomplicated stories and dismissing one another with ease. If I don't like what you say I can just be like, "Whatever boomer, I don't got to listen to you!" I can roll my eyes and be like, "Oh, you know the white dudes, they are the WORST!"

It's easy to do this kind of stuff, to tell simple stories about one another where we just say, "I'm done with you, don't have to deal with you." Whether it's because of our race, because of our socioeconomic class...whatever it is, it's really easy to not have to see each other. I can just label you and the conversation is done. If I am a black and you're white and you're being racist or ignorant, I can write you off: "Whatever white person." Or if I'm white, I can lash out and dismiss you by saying, "Oh, you know, black people..." But the actuality of our lives and our stories and who we are is so much more rich and fraught and complex.

And I wanted to talk about this complexity as we're seeking to be good neighbors because when we lose sight of our own complexity and the complexity of the stories even of the people who are supposed to be the people of "blessed to be a blessing," who lost their way because they forgot about the God who actually had given them the promise in the first place...that's when things went haywire. And they were called back into alignment with the God who already saw them and knew all the stuff, the God who had never forgotten the promise. And sometimes we also forget that the promise is for us too, and so then we live in relationship with one another as like, "I don't need to see you because I don't feel very seen right now."

And so, if we really want to be good neighbors, we need to turn to these characters and look at them as real people. We re-look at Sarai: she's mentioned more than any other woman in the Bible, 55 times. She's actually Abram's sister. She is barren. This is what we know about her. Her being named as barren is an agricultural term. It means her womb is inhospitable to life, since at the time they thought only men had



anything to do with procreation. She's beautiful and she's desired, by the way, we're told that about her when she's in her 80s, ladies. She's twice farmed out to men, so she is a survivor of sexual violence. They get money from the Pharaoh because she was sold off. She's also absent from the text in many places and is a secondary actor. The promise isn't even really given to her. She blames Abram for all the stuff that happens to her. She banishes Hagar when she's barren, and then, when she has a baby, she sends Hagar to the wilderness to die. She dies at 127. She is both an oppressor...and she's oppressed. She's known pain and she's inflicted pain. She's believed in the promise and forgotten it as well. She's loved her spouse and also not treated him well.

So then we have Hagar, whose name means "a foreign thing." It's the root word that is translated as "sojourner" or "foreigner," which, as a reminder, Israel is told that they're responsible to care for the sojourner in their midst. Here in Genesis, Abram and Sarai are failing at this job right? Hagar, the sojourner, is treated unjustly: her body is not her own and she's given as a surrogate wife. Her source of her power in one way is her fertility, but its fertility without autonomy. She sees God and she lives. She names God. She has known what it means both to be in a privileged position of one who can bear a child and yet is radically vulnerable and marginalized as well. She's known pain and suffering, but is also told that her son will become a great nation.

And we have Abram himself who is the "father of our faith," who totally forgot what the faith was all about. He's the guy who though the patriarch, often responded in fear and disappeared, "Hey, not my deal, I'm going to go chill in the corner over here where it's a lot safer."

These are real stories. They're human stories. They're invitations to us. They remind us that when we remember the promise, that is when we're able to live in alignment with all that we are called to be; we are blessed by the God who sees us so that we might be a blessing. We have the promise of God's love, of the God who has always seen us. And God keeps reminding us, "Don't forget."

All of our stories are complex. I don't know every piece of your story. I don't know about the grief and the pain and the trauma you may have endured. I know some though, and I'm learning more, and I'm always grateful for that. I want us to be a people who remember what it means to live in the promise. And that promise is of the God named El Roi, the God who sees us, the God who sings to us in a more profound way than Fred Rogers, even: "It's you I like, just the way you are."

So what if the invitation and the pathway to be a good neighbor is to open our hearts and the vulnerable places to the God who sees? To let ourselves find that God gazes at us and says, "I see you, even if you don't feel seen, and where you don't feel seen, let me call you beloved and heal you with my love." Because when we let our whole selves be seen by God then we get to remember the promise. And then, as we ourselves know what it is to be loved by God, we find our place in the story of God's



goodness and promise, and we get to truly see, honor, and love one other...we get to actually be good neighbors.

I've said this before, but one of my greatest joys is seeing you all come alive. This, above any other reason, is why I'm a pastor. Begin able to bear witness to the moment when someone experiences themselves as being seen and loved by God in the totality of their story...this is a thing of beauty.

When we are seen we then get to see each other. And then we get to see our neighbors. We are loved by God and that love transforms and invites us to breathe and live the promise in our lives: We are blessed to be a blessing. We are seen by God so that we might see. We are loved so that we might love. So in this Advent season, might you find your place in the story. For indeed, even though we are just one of those stars of the promise that was made in Genesis, we **are** one of them.

And Emmanuel, God-with-us, the God who sees us, has come.

May you find yourself seen in the story. As you leave the service today, you're going to receive an advent companion card with whom to journey this season. You are invited to imagine and know yourself as seen in the story of God's advent on earth, to put yourself in the position of someone else: whether a manger, an angel, or Elizabeth. Where it's not just about a hero's narrative you need to tell about yourself, but it's imagining how this story is experienced from someone else's perspective. Maybe it's an innkeeper. Maybe it's everyone's favorite, the ass (donkey). Maybe it's Mary. Maybe you're a man and you get Mary... great! You can then wonder what it would be like to be a young woman who could get killed for being pregnant.

How does that change what it means to be seen by God in your own story? So to encourage you, you can go on the website, you can sign up to get the advent devotional because every day we're going to be inviting one another to engage the story and to see from a new perspective.

El Roi, the God of all love sees you. Let yourself be seen. And in that seeing, may we see one another, that we might indeed be heirs of the promise: to love God, to love ourselves, and to love our neighbors. For indeed, everything in the Bible is summed up by that: to love God and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. So might you know yourself as on who is fully seen so that you might see and that we might then truly be good neighbors.

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Let's pray together.

God, you know that being seen can be terrifying. For when we are actually seen, there's a lot of us that doesn't get to live. But what does get to live is the deepening emergence of your new creation within us. Of your image and your beloved creation



of us. God, grant us faith in this Advent season to be a people who re-approach you with an earnest hunger and willingness to be vulnerable, that we might indeed be seen by you and emerge from the wilderness and from the long winter as people who see and are then better neighbors. May your kingdom come, oh Lord, our El Roi.

Amen.

December 9, 2019

JORDAN MATTHEW TOMMERDAHL: REFLECTIONS ON JORDAN, MENTAL HEALTH,
& GOD’S LOVE

Jordan Matthew Tommerdahl: 12/9/1992 – 11/27/2019

You can read Jordan’s obituary [here](#).

You can donate to the Jordan Matthew Tommerdahl Scholarship Fund [here](#).

Romans 8:31-39 The Message (MSG, with my paraphrase)

So, what do you think? With God on our side like this, how can we lose? If God didn’t hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing godself to the worst by sending Emmanuel, is there anything else God wouldn’t gladly and freely do for us? And who would dare tangle with God by messing with one of God’s beloved ones? Who would dare even to point a finger? The One who died on account of love for us—who was raised to life for us—is in the presence of God at this very moment saying the truth about us. Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ’s love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not mental illness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst things listed in Scripture....

None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I’m absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely *nothing* can get between us and God’s love because of the way that Jesus has embraced us.

Good morning. My name is Sara Wilhelm Garbers. My spouse and I are best friends with Sarah and Ty, and since their move to Boston have served as surrogate additional siblings to Jordan. The family has asked me to share a few words as a pastor and a friend about *Jordan, mental health, and about God’s love*.

Last week as I was reeling from the news that Jordan had died, I was reaching for something to give me words to hold the pain and, not surprisingly to any of you who knew Jordan well, I turned to music. Jordan loved music of all kinds, and he lived a life that made music just by his being alive.

One song captured me, and the reasons for this are many: because of what it names about the grief of loving and losing to death those whom we love; and because it is sung by an artist who also died by suicide. I am speaking of the song “[One More Light](#)” by the band Linkin Park and of their former frontman Chester Bennington who died by suicide in 2017. I’ve listened to it on repeat and wanted to share it today as a way to say something about Jordan, about God’s love, and about us.

*Should've stayed, were there signs, I ignored?
Can I help you, not to hurt, anymore?
We saw brilliance, when the world, was asleep
There are things that we can have, but can't keep
If they say
Who cares if one more light goes out?
In a sky of a million stars
It flickers, flickers
Who cares when someone's time runs out?
If a moment is all we are
We're quicker, quicker
Who cares if one more light goes out?
Well I do*

We are here today because a bright light has gone from us, a man who was love and magic, and goodness. And we care. And we ask why and have questions- "Could I have helped you not to hurt anymore?" and we grieve and ache and miss his brilliance and light.

Last year Jordan got sick, our bright light and radiant smile started to have questions about what was real as the realities he had once known began to seem suspect and unknown.

His family loved him, and so did you. And our beautiful friend was living in inner turmoil in his brain as his illness fluctuated. **And he died because of this illness.**

So today I want to be clear about a few things. The first is this: Mental health and mental illness is just like any other illness. Think of cancer- to hear the word itself causes fear, and yet we know that some kinds of cancer are more livable than others- "Stage 2 melanoma" is far different to hear than "Stage 4 pancreas cancer." And I want to be clear so that we might continue to deepen our understanding about mental health, knowing that Jordan's illness, like any other kind of sickness, wasn't anyone's fault, let alone his.

Some of us here in the room will get or are living right now with mental health illness of one form or another, and through meds, therapy, and other supports we are and will be able to live and flourish...but for Jordan, though we all wanted him to get better and be healed, his illness got so deep that it took him from us. Yet even in the depths of his illness and despair, **he was still absolutely Jordan, his illness didn't nor does it define him**, just like someone who dies of cancer is more than their tumor. To the very end of his life Jordan was who he was; he died with a desire to be a part of goodness and to keep safe the world and those he loved.

Recognizing his illness at work, Jordan wanted to go to school to help others who also were sick with mental illness, which is why the family has started a scholarship fund in honor of Jordan to support those seeking educational in the mental health profession.

The second thing I want to be clear about as a friend of Jordan and a pastor, especially in view of the fact that we are honoring his life here in a church, is this: the church has so often failed us in our aims to name and make sense of death by suicide, so if you have ever heard that death by suicide is some other kind of death than by another illness, this is wrong and untrue. Mental illness, just like any other illness, has nothing to do with categories of sin or

selfishness. Jordan was wrestling with his illness and, in the end, he died from it, **but none of us would dare blame a person for dying from cancer, right? Nor should any of us dare to blame Jordan for his death or name it as selfish.**

We might not understand, but which illness makes sense?

That is why we rage and grieve because death always counters the logic of life.

Absence always counters the logic of love's desire for presence.

Know this: Jordan is a light and goodness and is held in the love and peace of the God who holds and Sustains all things, and I believe that in the end, when he came to that moment of facing his own death, **he knew peace because his embattled mind found its freedom and home in the loving God, from whom he came.**

There's nothing anyone could have done to save him from this. And so we release and grieve and rage and cry, but we trust Jordan to this God and to the peace that heals and holds him forever.

When I listened to "One More Light" on repeat on Thursday morning again and again, crying and thinking of Jordan, God, and death by suicide, my mind turned to Genesis 12 where God promises Abram that his decedents would be as numerous as the stars... and it hit me that *Jordan was and will always be one of those stars of the promise*, and we who are here today got to bear witness to that brilliance and goodness and light.

And as the Romans passage I read reminds us, **nothing can or will separate Jordan or us from this God of love nor the promise which was and is ours.**

So honor and remember Jordan by remembering the promise and shining. The thing about Jordan is he always believed there was plenty...enough love, enough light, enough smiles and goodness and joy for each of us. So shine, risk , gather, dance to Disney songs, light campfires, tell stories, make music and art and love. Be the light you are, look out at the stars and wonder around at night in awe, travel to other countries, backpack through wilderness and shine, remembering our bright light and brother.

The second way to honor and remember Jordan is to help to end the stigmas about mental health, name it as illness and then let's work together to support each other if and when we get sick.

And finally, **honor Jordan by loving**, Jordan believed that at the core and center of all things was love and a God who was big enough to love everyone- people of all genders or all races, of all backgrounds, of all loves, of all colors- black, brown, white, rainbow. So live this love, be this love, and cherish this love.

And grieve, laugh, cry, love, hug and sing for:

If they say

Who cares if one more light goes out?

In a sky of a million stars

It flickers, flickers

Who cares when someone's time runs out?

If a moment is all we are

We're quicker, quicker

Who cares if one more light goes out?

Well we do

Yes, we do. We love you Jordan.

711

We trust you to the God of all love and peace. May you be held forever in this love. Rest in that light and peace and love forever, dear brother. We will and do already miss you terribly, Jordan.

Amen.

January 11, 2020

712

LOVE STORY: ABBY & ISAAC'S GARDEN + T-SWIFT WEDDING MEDITATION

**Note: My cousin Abby LOVES Taylor Swift. A few months ago, there was a viral tweet which invited people to list their top ten Taylor Swift songs. Since Abby isn't on Twitter, I texted her to ask her top ten T-Swift songs and she responded with the following (of course, she didn't exactly follow the rules, and picked 11 songs- ha!):*



My Cousins, Aimee & Abby, at T-Swift in Seattle

1. Mean
2. Call it what you want to
3. The man
4. Afterglow
5. Wildest dreams
6. Starlight
7. All too well
8. Out of the woods
9. End game
10. Long live
11. Gorgeous

So when I was working on her wedding, I thought I had to incorporate her greatest loves into the meditation and am quite pleased with how it turned out! As you read, see if you can identify all of the T-Swift references. After the original text of the meditation, I will include a section at the end where I highlight all of the references (only from her favorite songs). Do you think you can find them all? Good luck and ENJOY!

As Abby's cousin, and fellow minister, I will apologize (sorry, not sorry) for how my forthcoming words are steeped in five things that I know my cousin loves, four of these being things which Isaac also loves: God (both), Isaac (for Isaac, Abby), wit (both), military references (both), and (of course) for Abby, Taylor Swift (note: as a Wilhelm who honors

her homeland of Minnesota, I refuse to include any mention of the Oregon Ducks or the 713 dreaded Yankees, though more gracious ministers than I might).



Abby & Isaac cheering for the dreadful NY Yankees

For what follows, I am indebted to my lovely spouse, Andy who not only came up with the original idea to compose one paragraph of this message solely utilizing Abby's favorite song lyrics (which for those of you who love TSwift will note, I've amended to pepper the lyrics throughout—you're welcome, Abby), but also who commented about Abby & Issac's "The story of Us." "You know that's a Taylor Swift song reference, right? The one with the music video from the library." So well, played Isaac and Abby as I missed that until Andy said it. Some of these references to the four/five loves will be apparent to many of you— and some of the quotes more obscure, but I trust that in the end this meditation will prove an edifying invitation for us all to let love in. So, let us begin.

"Are you ready for it?"

People sometimes ask me what it means to me to be feminist. Case in point: When I first started dating my spouse, Andy, he queried: "So you're a feminist...does that mean you hate men?"



Isaac, being Isaac.

I looked at him and meaningful signaled to indicate that I was sitting with him as I said: "Clearly."

In a world where heterosexual relationships are so often steeped in power dynamics, the feminism that my cousin and our partners ascribe to is one that is rooted in our faith and an effort to live out the redemptive promise of the gospel of Jesus Christ: that we were meant to walk naked in the garden with God and with one another...without shame.

And I think that's the invitation and promise that lies before you both this day. It's the beautiful work of love...the love that remembers and is committed to living the way we were meant to live: seen in all that we are and loved for it.

And this is what love allows...for you to be complex, and to be cool. And to know it's ok for you to do.



Abby, being Abby.

To be a fearless leader.

To be an alpha type.

To find we believe you and get to know what that's like.

Relationships rooted in garden love remind us that you don't have to run as quick as you can.

Because love doesn't ask either of you to be "the man". Love asks you to be what the Genesis creation story actually names us: "earth creatures" people made from the dust, for me in the fecund creative love of God, where—as you live into this skin and your bones—you get to walk hand in hand with one another in the fullness of your humanity and love for one another.

This looks like: when people come at you, you have each other's back. That you are profoundly for each other. That you don't have to hustle. You don't have to question how much of this you deserve.

No, for here, in the love we were meant to embody and enjoy, you get to be each other's end game, be each other's first string, you get to be the A-team.



(pc: [Ashley LaMattino- Perlberg](#))

And yes, you both have big reputations, and big hearts, and big personalities. But who decided that is the problem? The beauty I have seen in my own life and that I know you both have already known with one another is that it is precisely your fully orb

personhood that drew you to one another. And what joy to dance in the wonder of such⁷¹⁵ love...dancing just like you're made of starlight, dreaming (seemingly) impossible dreams! So don't run.

Don't hide.

Let yourselves be seen. First by the creator who has fashioned you in love and made you to walk in freedom and life. And then, to walk with one another. And to remember that even when you want to put on the protective layers to cover your vulnerability and fear, that love invites you to drop the armor and walk hand in hand—naked and unafraid.

You might be tempted to blow things out of proportion and put each other in jail for something you didn't do, pinning one another's hands behind their back, sure you might have had reasons to attack, but no...because fighting with a true love is boxing with no gloves until there's no us.

As T-Swift reminds: sometimes the fear and self-protection is just in our head and we want to burn stuff down but it's not what you mean, and you know it all too well. So don't do this to one another. Don't lose this love; don't forget the garden promise.

And if my life and loving my spouse for the past 12 years has taught me anything, it's that love's promise in the gospel...to heal and redeem, to bring peace and goodness and healing and resurrection...this is true.

And your lives are a testimony to that good news too..that God's love can heal and redeem us, that a perfecting love can drive out fear.



Me & Abby in 2018

So let it.

You both have known what it means to have your castle crumble overnight, where you've brought a knife to a gun fight, where the liars are calling you one. Where your flowers grew back as thorns with windows boarded up after the storm. You've survived as people have come at you with words like knives. Swords and weapons have been used against you, which have knocked you off your feet again, got you feeling like a nothing.

But you both also know from your military service that fear is a force that sharpens your senses and you are both here because you never quit, you have persevered and thrived in view of adversity. So yes, "if you are knocked down, you will get back every time and draw on every ounce of strength to accomplish your mission for you are never out of the fight (Isaac, that is a Marcus Luttrell's paraphrase from his book *Lone Survivor*, you're welcome). And yes, Abby, he's gorgeous...but don't be sad, cuz he's fit like a daydream, and you're the one he's walking to.

My point here is this: Let love in again and again. Meet each other in the afterglow. Remind each other that you're what each other wants, even when you break each other's hearts. We were built to fall apart and fall back together. So let love heal and invite you to live and laugh and dance.

You can "Call it what you want to" but I'll tell you what I call this: Love. I call it good.



Isaac & Abby in London on their honeymoon

This isn't the stuff of wildest dreams...this is the stuff of your real lives, the life you have already been building with one another. It's the good that happens when love comes in, when God's kingdom comes in our midst.

Love that doesn't own, or possess, or save each other, but love that knows each other.

On a history book page it was the end of a decade but the start of an age. So long live the walls you've crashed through. All the kingdom lights shine for you two. And indeed, "long live all the magic (you've) made."

So walk with freedom, dear friends. Walk to each other. Fly like the jet stream, high above the whole scene. Love each other like you're brand new.

Walk the way you were meant to...in the garden with God and one another.

And together, help us all get this world to find its way home to the love that we were all created for.

Cuz that's always been the end game of Emmanuel- God-with-Us.

A world where Yankees and Twins both always win (yes, I did just say that). A world where zero-sum fighting is exposed as being weak in the face of the peace that rode in on a donkey, announcing the coming of a new way of being human, one that is actually the oldest and simplest place: the garden which is our home and soul's true longing.

So win by being on the same team, win by loving each other. Win by choosing vulnerability, and being willing to risk love.

Remember this day, remember what you commit to one another. You aren't out of the woods yet, no instead you are invited to go deeper in to the depths of the wild where the Spirit of God dwells. Because this is where the clear is...



Abby & Isaac in Paris on their honeymoon

Remember because sometimes you'll hit the breaks too soon, 20 stitches in the hospital room, and you'll both start crying, but when the sun comes out, be looking at each other, and discover that the monsters will turn out to be just trees.

Walk in the garden, my friends. Naked and unafraid. For this, this is what we were meant to do.

And trust me...if you do this, if you remember, if you fight for it, if you lean in even when you want to run out and cling to safety, if you choose the garden in the way you love God, yourselves, and one another, then this love and life you are creating together will be beyond your wildest dreams.

To you Abby and Issac, may you be persons, together.

And God looked upon this and called the creation...very good and blessed it.

AMEN.



Abby & Isaac: Being Human Together (pc: [Ashley](#)

[LaMattino- Perlberg](#))

Here's the text again, but with all of the references highlighted and noted. Did you catch them all? **THERE ARE TWENTY-FIVE T-SWIFT REFERENCES!**

Again, here's Abby's favorite Taylor Swift songs:

1. Mean
2. Call it what you want to
3. The man
4. Afterglow
5. Wildest dreams

6. *Starlight*
7. *All too well*
8. *Out of the woods*
9. *End game*
10. *Long live*
11. *Gorgeous*

“Are you ready for it?” (from the song by that name, though not on the list, I couldn’t resist)

People sometimes ask me what it means to me to be feminist. Case in point: When I first started dating my spouse, Andy, he queried: “So you’re a feminist...does that mean you hate men?”

I looked at him and meaningful signaled to indicate that I was sitting with him as I said: “Clearly.”

In a world where heterosexual relationships are so often steeped in power dynamics, the feminism that my cousin and our partners ascribe to is one that is rooted in our faith and an effort to live out the redemptive promise of the gospel of Jesus Christ: that we were meant to walk naked in the garden with God and with one another...without shame.

And I think that’s the invitation and promise that lies before you both this day. It’s the beautiful work of love...the love that remembers and is committed to living the way we were meant to live: seen in all that we are and loved for it.

And this is what love allows...**for you to be complex, and to be cool. And to know it’s ok for you to do.**

To be a fearless leader.

To be an alpha type.

To find we believe you and get to know what that’s like (all from “The Man”...btw, “The Man” is my favorite T-Swift song).

Relationships rooted in garden love remind us that **you don’t have to run as quick as you can (from “The Man”).**

Because love doesn’t ask either of you to be **“the man” (from “The Man”).** Love asks you to be what the Genesis creation story actually names us: “earth creatures” people made from the dust, for me in the fecund creative love of God, where—as you live into this skin and your bones— you get to walk hand in hand with one another in the fullness of your humanity and love for one another.

This looks like: when people come at you, you have each other’s back. That you are profoundly for each other. That you **don’t have to hustle. You don’t have to question how much of this you deserve (from “The Man”).**

No, for here, in the love we were meant to embody and enjoy, you get to be each other’s **end game, be each other’s first string, you get to be the A-team (from “End Game”).**

And yes, you both have **big reputations (from “End Game”),** and big hearts, and big personalities. But who decided that is the problem? The beauty I have seen in my own life and that I know you both have already known with one another is that it is precisely your fully orbbed personhood that drew you to one another. And what joy to dance in the wonder of such a love...**dancing just like you’re made of starlight, dreaming (seemingly) impossible dreams (from “Starlight”)!**

So don’t run.

Don’t hide.

Let yourselves be seen. First by the creator who has fashioned you in love and made you to walk in freedom and life. And then, to walk with one another. And to remember that even when you want to put on the protective layers to cover your vulnerability and fear, that love invites you to drop the armor and walk hand in hand—naked and unafraid.

You might be tempted to **blow things out of proportion and put each other in jail for something you didn't do, pining one another's hands behind their back, sure you might have had reasons to attack, but no...because fighting with a true love is boxing with no gloves until there's no us.** (from "Afterglow")

As T-swift reminds: sometimes the fear and self-protection is **just in our head and we want to burn stuff down but it's not what you mean** (from "Afterglow"), and you know it all too well. (from "All too Well") So don't do this to one another. Don't lose this love; don't forget the garden promise.

And if my life and loving my spouse for the past 12 years has taught me anything, it's that love's promise in the gospel...to heal and redeem, to bring peace and goodness and healing and resurrection...this is true.

And your lives are a testimony to that good news too..that God's love can heal and redeem us, that a perfecting love can drive out fear.

So let it.

You both have known what it means to have your **castle crumble overnight, where you've brought a knife to a gun fight, where the liars are calling you one. Where your flowers grew back as thorns with windows boarded up after the storm** (from "Call It What You Want To"). You've survived as people have come at you with words like knives. Swords and weapons have been used against you, which have knocked you off your feet again, got you **feeling like a nothing** (from "Mean").

But you both also know from your military service that fear is a force that sharpens your senses and you are both here because you never quit, you have persevered and thrived in view of adversity. So yes, "if you are knocked down, you will get back every time and draw on every ounce of strength to accomplish your mission for you are never out of the fight (Isaac, that is a Marcus Lutter's paraphrase from his book *Lone Survivor*, you're welcome). And yes, Abby, he's **gorgeous...**(from "Gorgeous") but don't be sad, cuz he's fit like a **daydream, and you're the one he's walking to** (from "Call It What You Want To").

My point here is this: Let love in again and again. Meet each other in the **afterglow** (from "Afterglow"). Remind each other that **you're what each other wants, even when you break each other's hearts. We were built to fall apart and fall back together** (from "Out of the Woods"). So let love heal and invite you to live and laugh and dance.

You can **"Call it what you want to"** (from "Call It What You Want To") but I'll tell you what I call this: Love. I call it good.

This isn't the stuff of **wildest dreams** (from "Wildest Dreams")...this is the stuff of your real lives, the life you have already been building with one another. It's the good that happens when love comes in, when God's kingdom comes in our midst.

Love that doesn't own, or possess, or save each other, but love that knows each other.

On a history book page it was the end of a decade but the start of an age. So long live the walls you've crashed through. All the kingdom lights shine for you two. And indeed, "long live all the magic (you've) made" (from "Long Live").

So walk with freedom, dear friends. Walk to each other. **Fly like the jet stream, high above the whole scene. Love each other like you're brand new** (from "Call It What You Want To").

Walk the way you were meant to...in the garden with God and one another. 720
And together, help us all get this world to find its way home to the love that we were all created for.

Cuz that's always been the **end game (from "End Game")** of Emmanuel- God-with-Us. A world where Yankees and Twins both always win (yes, I did just say that). A world where zero-sum fighting is exposed as being weak in the face of the peace that rode in on a donkey, announcing the coming of a new way of being human, one that is actually the oldest and simplest place: the garden which is our home and soul's true longing. So win by being on the same team, win by loving each other. Win by choosing vulnerability, and being willing to risk love.

Remember this day, remember what you commit to one another. **You aren't out of the woods(from "Out of the Woods")** yet, no instead you are invited to go deeper in to the depths of the **wild (from Mumford & Sons song "The Wild", which was a super important song to me this year)** where the Spirit of God dwells. Because this is where the **clear (from "Out of the Woods")** is...

Remember because sometimes **you'll hit the breaks too soon, 20 stitches in the hospital room, and you'll both start crying, but when the sun comes out, be looking at each other, and discover that the monsters will turn out to be just trees (from "Out of the Woods").**

Walk in the garden, my friends. Naked and unafraid. For this, this is what we were meant to do.

And trust me...if you do this, if you remember, if you fight for it, if you lean in even when you want to run out and cling to safety, if you choose the garden in the way you love God, yourselves, and one another, then this love and life you are creating together will be beyond your **wildest dreams (from "Wildest Dreams")**.

To you Abby and Issac, may you be persons, together.

And God looked upon this and called the creation...very good and blessed it.

AMEN.

January 19, 2020

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THE I AM: A SERMON FOR MLK SUNDAY (EXODUS 3:1-15)

Sermon given at Colonial Church on the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday, January 19, 2020. You can listen to the sermon [online](#).

Exodus 3:1-15

1 Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. **2** There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. **3** Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." **4** When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." **5** Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." **6** He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

7 Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, **8** and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. **9** The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. **10** So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." **11** But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" **12** He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

13 But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" **14** God said to Moses, "I am who I am.^[1] He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'" **15** God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Lord,^[2] the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you':

This is my name forever,

and this my title for all generations.



Freedom
Freedom
I can't move
Freedom, cut me loose
Singin', freedom
Freedom
Where are you?
'Cause I need freedom, too
I break chains all by myself
Won't let my freedom rot in hell
Hey! I'ma keep running
'Cause a winner don't quit on themselves
 -Beyoncé, "[Freedom](#)"

Good Morning. Welcome back to our series this January, in our Year of the Good Neighbor, entitled "Love Moves Into the Neighborhood". The series is based off the beginning of the book of John, from The Message translation where it reads, "The word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood." John 1:14

Today we're going to talk about how the word BECAME flesh through this God who moves into our neighborhood. I'm also going to talk a little bit about one of our core values, *Welcome, Beloved*, and how our value of *Welcome* and the song we just heard about freedom are realized in the invitation of the word that has become flesh; the invitation of welcome and the longing for freedom— going way back — has been the cry of our souls and the call of God to us, to be a people who are free, to be a people of deep and profound welcome where home is a space for everyone.

Will you pray with me? *Oh, love that has indeed become flesh and moved into our neighborhood, may we be a people who move with you, into your good news, into your freedom, and into your promised land. Amen.*

Now it's not every sermon that seeks to bring together Beyoncé, Martin Luther King Jr., Moses, Jesus, and us... but that is what I am attempting to do today... are you ready? Okay. Here we go!



The good news proclaimed in John 1, my friends, is the movement of God's freedom. This is the movement that MLK called us to see, that of which he preached: God's long work of bringing freedom to all people. And I want to spend some time today tracing the theme of freedom through Scripture. To do so we could go way back to the book of Genesis, but I figured you don't want to be here all day, so we're going to start with Exodus three where it talks about God showing up and calling Moses. Next we'll move forward to John, chapter 1 and the verse on which our series "Love Moves Into the Neighborhood" is built. Then, I'll end by talking about the ways that these invitations to be a people of welcome and freedom echo through the life and the work of Martin Luther King Jr. (which Beyoncé's song, "Freedom" also calls us to) as it invites us to be people who are, indeed, good neighbors.

So, starting with the passage from Exodus... what's happening here? There are a lot of things going on in this text and I want to highlight just a few of as we move into the conversation.

This summer we did a series on the "I AM" statements in the book of John and we talked about how the echo of God as the "I AM" goes way back into the Older Testament in the Hebrew tradition and Scriptures. The I AM is the name for God. One of the most common words that's utilized to refer to God throughout these texts is the name YHWH, which is often translated as "Lord" into English. This isn't exact though as YHWH is connected to the verb, which means I AM or "I will be who I will be." So when you read LORD, you're actually reading about this God, the I AM, the I will be who I am will be.[\[3\]](#)

What I love about this invitation to think of God as the I AM, as I preached on during our summer series is how God as I AM invites us to understand God as the ground of being; God as our source, as the place of all life where we are invited to find our connection to true life and being and live from that place. And so what's happening in the book of John is that by his employing the language of I AM in connection to Jesus' words and ministry, John is echoing a narrative and deep understanding of God that would have been central to the Jewish people's conception of God as YHWH...the "I AM", thus both arguing that Jesus is divine AND that Jesus is the one who was and is and is the ground and source of all of our life and being.

John invites us to encounter Jesus as the word become flesh....the I AM in human form. 724 Jesus who then, throughout the book of John says, "I am, I AM." This is the signal that he is God who has become human and is in our midst dwelling with us. This "I AM" is the light that the Israelites follow, it's the light that we ourselves follow, it's the North star that black enslaved persons followed to freedom. This is the "I AM", the *word who has become flesh*. Returning back to this third chapter of Exodus, there are so many different things that are happening in addition to the announcement of God as the I AM. One of the additional things that I want highlight is how here, with the call of Moses, he becomes a paradigm and a prophet of God's freedom. God has heard the cries of God's people who are enslaved and then calls to Moses (who's an unlikely hero!) to say, "It's you that I want to help bring my people to freedom!" In this way, Moses is the first prophet of freedom, Jesus is both the second Moses plus the I AM become flesh, and MLK is another Moses, inviting the people out of oppression and into God's freedom.

The first Moses had a storied background and life where, first of all, when Pharaoh was going to have all of boys his age killed, he was put into the water and gets picked up by Pharaoh's daughter and brought into and then raised inside of Pharaoh's home -even though he's actually an Israelite- and then he ends up killing an Egyptian who is being unfair and unjust to one of the Israelites. After this he flees into the desert. And so, in Exodus chapter three, we find him living where he had been with his father-in-law and his wife's family in the desert of Midian in the wilderness and he comes to this mountain.

Now this mountain, Mount Horeb is also thought to be the same mountain by another name Mount Sinai. Mount Horeb/Sinai was known as the place where God dwelt, the mountain of God, a.k.a. YHWH's place. This is where Moses will receive the plan for the tabernacle, this is the place where the Israelites will worship God, this is where the Ten Commandments are given by God to the people.

This mountain features as a prominent place throughout the life of God's people. And it's here, at this place, that Moses is first encountered by God in this burning bush, this sacred mountain where the divine dwells. In the ANE world, mountains were thought to be the locations where the divine resided. Do you remember when Jesus meets to the woman at the well she says to him, "You Jewish people say we must worship God on this mountain but we Samaritans, we worship on this mountain?" And Jesus then says, "No, it's no longer on mountains where people must worship for now the time is where all people will worship in spirit and in truth." By saying this Jesus as the word become flesh counters the long-held belief that mountains are where God meets humans as God now comes to earth and meets us.

But here, in this time in Exodus, Moses is on the mountain and there's a fire burning the bush. Fire is another important theme for the ways in which God shows up.[\[4\]](#) Recall to mind what happens is as the Israelites are moving through the wilderness on their way to the promised land... a fire guides them at night! This fire stays with them until they arrive safely in their new land. Thus, when Jesus is recorded in John as saying, "I am the light of

the world,” John is hearkening back to this fire, the consuming fire that doesn’t actually 725 burn up the bush, nor does it actually burn us up. It just makes us different. So here at this place, Moses is encountered by God and he’s invited to remove his sandals because it is holy ground.

One of the wonders that I have about this section of the passage as you read about YHWH calling Moses to remove his sandals is how, in the Ancient Near Eastern context, you would remove your sandals when you came home. I wonder about that... What does it mean if in this encounter of God, Moses, who has been wandering in wilderness, who is not been a “fit” or at home anywhere– first removed from his own family, brought up in another family, then he has to leave that place and he’s been wandering in the desert–he now comes to this place and God shows up and says, “You’re home, this is sacred ground. Take off your shoes. Welcome beloved. Live from that place now and lead my people into freedom.” So here he encounters God and God partners with Moses to then lead God’s people to freedom. What does it mean if he is finally home and seen when here in chapter three God shows up and says, “I AM is my name.”? What might such an invitation call to us as we think about what it means to live Welcome, Beloved?[5]

As I noted just a few minutes ago, I AM here in Exodus three is connected to the Jewish word for God, YHWH. The sense of really deeply that I AM, I will be who I will be, the God who is with them, the God who is there holding space, the God who brings them into freedom, “I AM the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt that I might dwell with you,” which we then read in John about how the word becomes flesh and dwells with us. The great I AM holds us and so we don’t have to be afraid.

In the Greek translation of Exodus 3 (in the LXX), It says of God that God is the *ego eimi*, which is picked up later in John, where it talks about Jesus as the I AM. However, an interesting thing happens here in John 1:14 where Jesus is not yet referred to as the I AM (*ego eimi*), but as the *logos*(word) *egento* (become) flesh. What I would argue is that what’s happening here is that Jesus is being positioned as both the new Moses, inviting people to the promised land of freedom, but also God (thus John 1 features so prominently in early arguments about Jesus’ divinity). Jesus is also the I AM who shows up in the burning bush, who shows up with the people.

Let me say more about this...

Here in John 1:14 where the word *becomes* flesh in Greek is *egeneto*. Some of you may be happy to know that the nerdy part of me got to spend some time hanging out with my Greek to English lexicon yesterday (and it was really fun!)...the rest of you are like, “That’s nice, Sara.” *Egeneto* shows up here in John 1:14 as an aorist verb, which means basically it’s something that happened in the past, one time. So the word *become* flesh and this becoming in Greek and the range of meaning for it is means something like that which came into being through the process of birth, to be born, to be produced. So *egento* is talking about something like how God becomes human.

This verse itself was so important in the early church as they tried to make sense of who Jesus was....wrestling with questions like; “Is Jesus God?” Because what we’re told here is

that the Word (God, the I AM), **becomes**, takes on a new form and actually **becomes flesh** in our midst. The Greek-English lexicon talks about how this verb, *egeneto*, doesn’t quite have the permanency of the verb *eimi* (the I AM), but it’s a sense that what happens, I would argue, is that Jesus, as God who is the eternal *eimi* (*YHWH*) becomes (*egento*) flesh and then later, as we go down the passage to verse 18, where it is translated in the NRSV as “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.” That Jesus is the Son *who is*...which has the same connection back to the verb *eimi*, thus the word *who egentos* is the *ego eimi*...the I AM, in whom we live and move and have our being!

So what I’m saying here is that there’s this way that the word is becoming flesh — the God who always was, now takes on human form in Jesus and comes to earth! What happens here then is that this word is now in our midst as the God who was and is who now, in Christ, is inviting us into freedom.

And one of the things that’s important to know about Martin Luther King Jr. is that he was both deeply steeped in seminary training and had his doctorate in theology, AND he also grew up in the Black church knowing these stories of Moses and Jesus and freedom.

We first see the people call out to God when they are enslaved –they long and cry for freedom. God utilizes Moses and encounters Moses as the I AM and they move to freedom. And then Jesus comes, as the human form of God, leading us to freedom. He calls out to us: “Follow me into the truth and the promised land of where you were meant to dwell!” And Martin Luther King shows up in the 1960s following in that tradition to say: “We are called to be a people of freedom, to be a people who both in our spiritual lives and in our embodied lives together, march and move towards freedom!” And we as God’s people, following the I AM who has encountered us have likewise become radically changed, for we have found ourselves at home in the presence of the I AM and we are invited to take off our sandals and be at home in God that we might likewise, be people and prophets and midwives and sisters and stewards of freedom, creating more of God’s kingdom here on earth indeed, as it is in heaven.

Some of you may recall that the night before Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, he gave his last sermon, entitled, “I’ve Been To The Mountaintop”. As I was working on my sermon for the Sunday where we honor his work and legacy, I wondered about what it means to be a people who go to the mountain, who are willing to let ourselves be encountered by the I AM who is the God of freedom, the God of profound welcome, who invites us– in all that we are–to be changed and transformed, that we will be encountered by a fire that doesn’t burn us up, but makes us truly who we were called and invited to be. The night when he gave this last sermon, MLK was encouraging and challenging the people, naming the injustices that were present and against which they labored, protested, and worked. Let’s pick up from the end of his message...

*I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead, but it really doesn't matter with me now because I've been to the mountain top. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place, but I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain and I've looked over and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land! And so I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything, I'm not fearing any man. My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*⁷²⁷[\[6\]](#)

So question that I wonder about for us today is this: *Have you been to the mountain?* Have you encountered the I AM in the burning bush? Have you found your heart transformed by this God of love and freedom, who invites you to move into the rhythm of the I AM where you no longer need to struggle to protect your own ego, because you know that you are welcome and home?

For indeed, we are held in the love of the God who says, "Take off your sandals and stay awhile, but don't just do that...then put them back on and go down to do people who are crying out and do the work in the neighborhood that I've called you to be...a people who midwife freedom, a people who are prophets of freedom, a people who are mothers and daughters and sons and friends and neighbors who bear witness to that mountain of God's freedom, a people who say, 'I see that promised land. God's kingdom is coming. It's not yet, but I know it's real and I want to live my life oriented to that mountain.'" Living from the place of the vision from the mountain is living from the place of being held in the I AM, a place where we don't need to fear for there's space enough for each of us. It's a movement of God's kingdom and God's freedom for each of us and all of us, not just us as this people of Colonial Church, but us as all of our neighborhoods here in the Twin Cities, and us as a people around the world...people who follow the I AM who became flesh and moved into our neighborhood.

And so I wonder today... Have you been to the mountain? Can we go to the mountain together? Can we stand and sit with one another as we are encountered by God's love again? And sometimes, yes, this is scary because freedom asks something of us, but freedom is indeed the promise and the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, a freedom that is rooted in the I AM who is the I am and the I will be who I will be. The I AM reminds us that God has heard our cries so keep on marching friends because the Promise Land is a place of home for everybody. May we be a people who follow Moses, our brother, who follow Jesus, our I AM, and who follow our brother MLK in the long march and the journey of freedom as we seek to be people who join with this Jesus in moving into the neighborhood, living from a place of welcome and freedom.

Let us pray together. *God, we give you thanks for the ways in which you encounter and join with real people to bring about your freedom, your light, your good news, and your life. So God, even now as you hear the cries of both our hearts and the cries of our siblings around the world, God, may we be willing to take off our sandals and let you love and change and transform us, that our fears or our excuses or insecurities aren't going to have voice in the*

face of your great love that says, "I'm asking you to lead anyway. I'm asking you to love anyway. I'm asking you to move anyway." So might we indeed be a people who join you in your becoming flesh to become humans made in your image, formed by your love as the great I AM, to then indeed be the people of your freedom and good news in this world and all of our neighbors. For it's by your Spirit and your great love...not by power, nor by might, that we indeed cry FREEDOM.

AMEN.

[1] Exodus 3:14 Or *I am what I am* or *I will be what I will be*.

[2] [Exodus 3:15](#) The word "Lord" when spelled with capital letters stands for the divine name, *YHWH*, which is here connected with the verb *hayah*, "to be"

[3] I preached three times in this series, but the one where I most focused on the connection between "I AM" in Exodus to the book of John was given on June 30, 2019. "[I am the Light of the World](#)."

[4] See, for instance: Genesis 15:17; Exodus 14:24; 19:18; Leviticus 10:2; and Acts 2:3.

[5] I am grateful to Dennis Olson for his insight about the removal of sandals and its connection to home in the ANE on [Working Preacher](#).

[6] You can read the full message and listen to the audio [here](#).

On Bodies

I Corinthians 12:12-31

¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

¹⁴ Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." ²² On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴ whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, ²⁵ that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. ²⁸ And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

- I Corinthians 12:12-31 (NRSV)

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Breathe on us, breath of God that in these bodies and as this collective body we might see and know you.

Amen.

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One of my favorite poems is from the poet Mary Oliver. It's entitled "Wild Geese." As we begin, I invite you to listen to it.

"Wild Geese" By: By Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile, the world goes on.
Meanwhile, the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile, the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like wild geese, harsh and exciting--
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.¹

I love this poem. I love it because of how it resonates with the real of our lives for how many of us have spent lifetimes crawling on our knees for a hundred miles through deserts, repenting...forgetting, indeed, that we were meant to fly free; that we were meant to be a part of the body of Christ; that this is our place in the family of things? For sometimes we forget. And so, God calls to us again, inviting us to remember our place in the family of things...whether a hand, or an eye, or a foot—that each of us, *in our bodies*, make up this body gathered, and together we are God's body. And this, the being bodies who make up the body, this is our calling.

¹ Mary Oliver, "Wild Geese," from *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* (New York: Penguin, 2017), 347.

Our current preaching series is “Love Moves into the Neighborhood.” It is based off of the Message translation of John 1:14: “The word became today FLESH and moved into the neighborhood.” As we journey through this verse, each week we are considering the different elements of which it speaks The Word/Became/Flesh/And Moved Into/The Neighborhood, while simultaneously reflecting on our core values. Today we’re talking about the word that has become FLESH while also considering how this intersects with our core value of IMMERSE, as in “To immerse in sacred spaces and rhythms”; to immerse in our skin, in our bodies, in the waters of the baptism of life which bring us to the place we were meant to live from as we rise into our bodies, as this body. Thus, the sermon title for today: “On bodies.”

Let me begin then by telling you a bit about the history of understanding related to bodies inside of our faith. Going way back to Genesis and the waters of creation, our collective story along with our Jewish siblings is that of a God who creates, and in so doing, creates not just men (which most Ancient Near Eastern texts depict), but one in which women get created too! And together in their bodies, this man and this woman together walk naked with God in the garden and they are unashamed. Fast forward (just a little bit) to Jesus who comes to earth in a body. God incarnate, Emmanuel, God-with-us, God with skin on in Jesus is what we claim as the central core of our faith, that the word became flesh through a young woman’s body to live here amongst us, as love moved into the neighborhood.

And yet this *fleshiness*, this humanness of Jesus has often been overlooked or resisted throughout the history of faith in the church. In the early church, indeed, they were influenced by the theories and philosophies of the time which included Gnosticism and Stoicism, both of which were fundamentally opposed to the body and didn’t believe that God could possibly ever take on human form. In fact, to their line of thinking, to be spiritual was to flee your body. So when people say to me that my thinking as a Christian is shaped by the times in which I live, I want to reflect back to them and say: “1) Well, that’s the *point* of theology, humans trying to make sense of God in their own time; and 2), you cannot tell me that Gnosticism and Stoicism did not influence the early church in their denial and wrestling with the fact that Jesus had a body!

What I’m trying to say is that there have been people throughout the history of our faith who have told us that not only do bodies not matter to the spiritual life, but in fact, they’re probably an evil impediment to true spirituality. And so, our Christian theology has long just kind of skipped over Jesus of Nazareth, of whom we talk about at Christmas as being Emmanuel, God-with-us, both because of the anti-body philosophy promulgated by theologians and because it’s just really hard to figure out how do you make sense of Jesus as God and human in one? I mean, come on, that’s really tough, right?! And so instead of sitting in the tension of God+ human in Jesus or instead of letting ourselves be confronted by the idea that God came in human form, we instead have oftentimes relied on philosophies that name God as ineffable and omnipotent and omnipresent and all sorts of other words that probably only three of

us know, let alone what they mean.

And this anti-body thread inside of our faith matters, this refusal to deal with God as a flesh-and-blood human is important. It matters because where in our faith then is there room for the God who has become flesh? How does this good news actually has something to do with our actual bodies, our actual lives, our actual skin? Does it matter that the word became flesh or not?

Not only is there this anti-body history inside of philosophy that's influenced our faith, but these philosophies have then impacted the way that we approach texts such as Galatians 5:17, where it says, "For the flesh desires what is contrary to the spirit and the spirit that which is contrary to the flesh." Or Romans 6:19 where it says, "I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh." Or 1 Peter 2:11 which reads, "Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts that wage war against the soul."

Now maybe none of you have ever thought that the body was bad and, if so, hallelujah! Amen! Congratulations, that's awesome. But I know that in hearing these passages and corollary sermons and teachings while I was growing up, I didn't always know what to do with having a body. Like I knew there was something bad about the "flesh" and I reasoned: "I mean, I guess flesh is body and the bible says flesh is bad so then my body must be bad. And then—oh, by the way—I have a female body and I'm quite sure that those bodies are even more bad than guy bodies cuz like Eve sinned first and all I ever hear about at church is that women's bodies tempt men's bodies." This is me trying to figure out faith and the world at like seven years old, FYI.

Throughout the history of the church, we have people who indeed have been encountered by Jesus and this has changed them. But like the perfecting love of which it is written in 1 John 4, it takes time for the Gospel to do its work of transforming us; it takes a lifetime for us to live more and more into being the free people we were meant to be in Christ. And so, we have people throughout our history who have taught us that in order to follow Christ we have to mortify or abuse our flesh because our flesh is sinful. And when I read these theologies I'm just like: what does Emmanuel, God in flesh, have to do with our bodies and our actual lives in our bodies? Is Jesus good news for the body or not?

For our histories are steeped in the legacies of well-meaning people like Augustine, who's one of the major theologians of our tradition, who was really against the body. Out of his own story he came to faith. He had lived a life where he had slept with a lot of women, was not a great guy, and then he comes to faith Christ and he is like, "Okay, that was bad." But the problem with this is that as he's writing about faith, he thinks everything about bodies and particularly female bodies are sinful because he associates this all with his past and God's healing work hasn't yet helped him to see a redemptive view of women's bodies, and that impacts us up until this day where women's bodies throughout the history of Christianity have been written about as

being some sort of special temptress designed to make men stay away from God.

And if you think that this historic anti-body and anti-women's bodies thread doesn't matter, let me tell you it does for it mattered for me at 17. It mattered to me if the good news of Jesus Christ mattered for my skin, for did God think somehow there was something less holy about me as a young woman who just wanted to love Jesus and her neighbors? We come from this history, where well-meaning people just like the rest of us are trying to understand what it means to follow God. And so you have Aquinas with the best scientific understanding of his time, who says women are deformed male bodies. Okay, that's the best science of the time because technically like begets like, and they didn't get that women had anything to do with procreation. So he's not a bad dude, he's doing the best he can.

And yet this stuff and these histories matter for all of our bodies. And of course, not only do we have messages from the history of a church that doesn't always know what to do with Jesus having a body, let alone us having a body, but we live in a world where our having bodies is also fraught. We get images, whatever our genders, about what we're supposed to be and look like in order to count in the world, right? Women, you probably know what you're supposed to look like, right? Men, you do too. Our bodies are supposed to be young and fit and trim and ripped because otherwise we're not worthy of love, right?

And today I want to challenge us to really consider: Does the Gospel of Jesus Christ have anything to say about that? Is the gospel of Jesus good news for your body? Does it say anything about your worth in the world over and against forces that seek to destroy us in our bodies? I sure hope so.

We have these histories and these stories where we haven't known what to do with God putting skin on, let alone with our own skin. And here in the midst of these stories and this history I do, indeed, believe that the Gospel of Jesus Christ has something to say about our bodies that is actually good news.

Remember last week in talking about this passage, we talked about God as the great I am. *YHWH*, the one who was and is and is to come. God who is the ground of our being, who called out to the people of Israel to remind them that it is not by power nor by might, but by God's Spirit that we live. We're not ruled by some king, but we are held by the great I am, the *Ruach*, the Spirit of life and of breath, and it is from this place then, living in alignment with this source of life, these waters of baptism, **this** is from whence we live, we move, we have our bodies, and our being.

So in the Bible when it talks about flesh opposed to spirit, it's not saying get rid of your skin so you can be truly Christian. No! It's saying: "In your skin remember that you are called to live by Spirit, not power or might, but by the love of God, the great I am." That is our source, not the things of ego, the things where we're selfish or care only for ourselves. No, the *Spirit* as opposed to *flesh* is that which reminds us that in our bodies, as the collective body, we were meant to walk with God and with one

another. In this flesh and in these bodies the Gospel of Jesus Christ calls and invites us to indeed immerse ourselves in the waters of life, and it asks us this day a question: **Is the Gospel of Jesus good news for your actual body? Is the Gospel of Jesus Christ actual good news in your actual skin of your actual life? Is it?** What would it look like? What does it look like when we actually can say, "Maybe," and then potentially eventually, "I think so," and then eventually, potentially, "Yes."

"Yes, the gospel of Jesus is good news for my body."

My grandma Joey, who you've heard me talk about, is one of the loves my life. She was abused as a young woman and was sexually molested by her older brothers during her teenage years. She married my grandpa because she was pregnant. She had a terrible marriage and she hated her body my entire life. And even as a kid I knew this about her. Kids know that stuff, right? Constant diets, constant picking at things about herself, refusal to wear open-toed shoes lest anyone make fun of her feet. She didn't smile in pictures because her teeth were ugly (she thought). But I thought she was beautiful. Because every kid thinks their grown-ups are larger than life, right? And I would tell her all the time that she was so pretty and wonderful and she always blew me off...until one day when I was about 28 years old, I'll never forget being in the bathroom with my grandma ("G", as I called her), and she looked in the mirror and said, "You know? I am kind of cute." It took me 28 years of telling her, but finally that good news was starting to sink into her skin.

And I'll never forget when my grandma was deep into dementia, what it was like when in her body for the first time that peace of Christ that she had longed for was truly hers and you could see it radiate from her being because for the first time her body knew that she was loved just as she was. And that my friends is the invitation of the Gospel, that in this skin, in these bodies, in our lifetimes, that we can look in the mirror and see ourselves rightly. Not that, "Oh, I'm the head, so therefore I'm more important than you, hand." No. When we see ourselves rightly, we can love not only our individual bodies but the diversity of our collective body, for we know we are loved. And this indeed is good news that heals and transforms.

As I wrestled with my faith throughout the end of my teen years and into my early 20s, I didn't know what to do with the Gospel I professed; I didn't know if it was actually good news for my life or if God had put me in the wrong body because I wanted to lead and I wanted to preach and I wasn't supposed to do that as a young woman. And as I wrestled with what to do with my body and my skin and the God who I believed had made it, the goodness and the grace of God found me.

One of the ways it found me was through some of the writings of my black brothers and sisters, particularly in the United States, for whom God, Emmanuel, here with us meant something profound and important. That God took on flesh demonstrated that God isn't far removed from our daily lives, but the God who took on flesh and became one of us becomes the location from which we know God has suffered too and God sees us in the midst of our lives in this body. Therefore, we aren't alone in

this journey, for the Gospel of freedom and life is not just for eternity, no, it's good news and freedom and life and an invitation to us in this skin. It's through the words of these siblings in the faith who knew beyond what I had known that God with skin on meant something important for our lives in this skin and through their struggle and witness I began to believe again that maybe, just maybe, the Gospel of Jesus Christ had something to do with my actual life in my actual skin.

As I mentioned earlier this morning, these next weeks we're going to be journeying with the work of Howard Thurman in our Wednesday night Meetinghouse class, and I wanted to share a poem prayer of his called The Work of Christmas, which speaks to this good news.

When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and the princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, the work of Christmas begins. To find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among the people, to make music in the heart.²

For “you do not have to be good. You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.” No. For the good news of Jesus Christ calls you to rise into your skin and to fly. To, in your own skin, say yes to the role in the part of the body of Christ that you are meant to be. That in your body and in your skin, this good news is that which saves, and it is in this saving you, in the letting the salvific work of Jesus actually heal us and do its work that we get to be the body of Christ, that we get to be good neighbors, and so indeed may the Gospel of the one who has taken on flesh to be in our midst be that which reigns in our hearts. May we sing and dance in these bodies, in rhythm with the great I AM who has become flesh, who moved into our neighborhood.

Indeed, may the music of Christ might fill our hearts and our bodies and our lives and our homes and our streets. Because as a people, we have not been just sprinkled or washed, but we've been immersed in the love of the great I am.³ And then as this body we're going to party, not just like it's 1999, but like love has actually moved into the neighborhood.⁴ So might the Gospel of Jesus, the good news of the Word, who has become FLESH— God with skin on—be that which saves us...here in our own bodies, in our own skin, might we let ourselves be encountered by Emmanuel who announces to each of us our place in this body of things.

Amen.

² Howard Thurman, “The Work of Christmas,” in *The Mood of Christmas and other Celebration* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1973), 23.

³ This is a reference to a poem by Emilie Townes. Emilie Townes, “Untitled,” in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 183-4.

⁴ Referencing Prince's Iconic Song “1999” from Prince, *1999* (Hollywood: Warner Brothers, 1982).

Hope Interrupts

Leviticus 23:1-8

"The Lord spoke to Moses saying, 'Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, 'These are the appointed festivals of the Lord that you shall proclaim as holy convocations, my appointed festivals.' Six days shall work, be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of complete rest. A Holy convocation. You shall do no work. It is a Sabbath to the Lord throughout your settlements. These are the appointed festivals of the Lord, the Holy convocations, which you shall celebrate at the time appointed for them. In the first month, on the 14th day of the month at twilight, there shall be a Passover offering to the Lord, and on the 15th day of the same month is the festival of unleavened bread to the Lord. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread. On the first day, you shall have a Holy convocation. You shall not work at your occupations. For seven days, you shall present the Lord's offerings by fire. On the seventh day, there shall be a Holy convocation. You shall not work at your occupations."

- Leviticus 23:1-8

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Let's pray together.

God, I thank you that on this night we get to gather together and together with you to turn our faces to Jerusalem that we might find life. It's in your name that we gather, O Christ. Amen.

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Earlier today I commented to Jeff that this is probably not the most normative of Ash Wednesday passages that I've selected. So if you've never been to an Ash Wednesday service where Leviticus 23 has been read, you probably number amongst...the majority of the rest of the Christian Church, so welcome!

Why did I select Leviticus 23 as we begin this Lenten journey? I did so because of the importance of what is stated in this passage, and the importance in our gathering, I'm speaking, of course, of the importance of remembering. As human people, we so often forget. And so we gather on nights like this...to remember.

If you're like me, you sometimes forget things...like, for instance, you forget that you shouldn't plan a church picnic on your anniversary (sorry, babe). Sometimes we all forget. Sometimes we forget that we are loved, that grace is indeed not just for everyone else, but also for us. We forget the loves that sustain us, and sometimes we

forget even ourselves. But one of the beautiful things about God's journey with God's people, both Israel up until us who are gathered this night, is that God's grace is for us...and it helps us remember.

Here in Leviticus 23, God's people are invited to schedule their years and their days and their lives so that they might be a people who remember. What I share with you tonight will be some wisdom that was gleaned from a conversation in one of our Scripture Circles, things which stood out to me...about remembering.¹

When I was studying this passage, one of the first things that blew my mind, which I feel kind of silly admitting, is the realization I had that the Jewish calendar referenced in Leviticus 23 is lunisolar.² It's rooted in a seven-day, 28-day cycle, which, for some of my women out there, the 28 day cycles might sound familiar. Isn't that cool? It's in the Bible! A calendar that's connected to the cycle of women's bodies. That there is a connection between God and our bodies and this earth and sacred time...how cool is that? And as we journey through these days and years of remembrance, they are comprised of seven days with rest on the seventh, and likewise, every month there is a reset and release that our bodies engage in as well. Indeed, God made Sabbath for humans!

Do you remember when Sabbath was started? On the final day of creation, God made humans...and the next day God rested. God rested not just because God was tired, but because I think because it is a reminder to us humans that we are finite. We were born into the world dependent upon God's grace and creation, there is already food to eat and breathe to breathe, not on account of any work we have done, but because of who God is. YHWH alone is our source and we're invited to rest...each day, each week, each month...to rest and trust and remember that we're human and we are held by a loving God.

So here in Leviticus 23, we're brought into the calendar year in the Jewish community. The year begins with the first month on the 14th day, the second week, with Passover, and then moves into the Festival of Unleavened Bread.

A few details that I want to call to mind for us as we consider this passage.

First off: Passover itself -- the Passover is the reminder to the people of Israel, people who had been enslaved for 400 years, that God had heard their cries and intervened and saved them. The night of Passover, as Exodus records, the enslaved people put blood of the lamb on their thresholds and doorposts so that indeed they might be saved and their children, their young boys would not die. And so, to this day, Jewish people begin the year in this remembrance, both a remembrance that they had been enslaved...and remembrance that God saved them. This is where they start their year and move with God into the year in that remembrance. Memory is a central theme

¹ Learn more about our partnership with 40 Orchards at: <https://40orchards.org>.

² See, for instance: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/lunisolar-calendar>

for living rightly in the ways of YHWH. When we look at the story of God's people of Israel, we see that things go awry every time they forget, right? They go into the land and sometimes they become the oppressors because they forget that they were once enslaved, so every year God in God's grace says, "We're going to have another time for you to pause, so you remember. Remember, it is for freedom that I have called you. Remember"³

The celebration of Passover (The Festival of Unleavened Bread)—begins with a search throughout the house for any leaven. Observant Jews will gather any leaven and they will burn it, declaring any chametz, as they call it, "The dust of the earth." Any echoes you're hearing to our gathering this night (Ash Wednesday, right? Tonight you will be marked by the ash of the cross, reminded that you are from dust).

They gather the leaven and burn it, for they do not have need of it for what will come in this festival. They instead are called to eat matzo, unleavened bread. In so doing, the people are reminded not only did they have unleavened bread because they were a people who sojourned, but also as a reminder that they were a people who had been enslaved. Matzo was not a rich person's bread. It was a bread that the common person would have eaten. And so, as they move into the festival, they are called in the Passover Seder dinner to remember the Exodus, to remember the God who had freed them from slavery.

Over the Passover Seder dinner meal, four questions are typically asked of the youngest children. They are great questions.

The stage is set with the central question "Why is this night different from other nights?" I ask us that same question, why is this night different? What do we remember this night, friends? Why Ash Wednesday? Let's pause and sit with that question. Why is tonight different from other nights?

They are then asked:

1. On all other nights we eat leavened products and matzah, and on this night only matzah.
2. On all other nights we eat all vegetables, and on this night only bitter herbs.
3. On all other nights, we don't dip our food even once, and on this night we dip twice.
4. On all other nights we eat sitting or reclining, and on this night we only recline.

And for us tonight, my friends, we will make the signs of the cross on our foreheads with ashes. Do you know why? Why only tonight do we mark ourselves with ash? What is the grace we celebrate? Do we remember why we gather? Do we remember why Lent? Do we remember why we turn our faces to Jerusalem? Do we remember

³ To learn more, see: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Passover>.

who this Jesus is? Do we remember that the cross is for us? What makes tonight different. Let us pause so that we might remember.

Because sometimes we forget.

In Leviticus 23, we're reminded that the Sabbath comes every seven days. That in the first month on the 14th day we have Passover and Festival of Unleavened Bread which lasts for seven days. Then seven weeks later is the Festival of the First Fruits. And then in the seventh month on the first day is the Festival of Trumpets which leads to the 10th day, which is the Day of Atonement and then the Festival of Booths.

Every seven years there is a Sabbath and every seven times seven years there is a year of Jubilee, which is sabbath for the land and forgiveness of all debts. All of these things are designed to remind the people -- people who forget -- that God is our source; that freedom is our calling. And we are to live in accordance with the rhythm of the God of all life in whom we live and move and have our being...through remembrance and rest.

And so my friends, on this night as we remember the ashes, we are reminded that we're in need of at least a once-a-year reset. A night to remember that we are dependent upon the love and grace of God. That as human people, we are frail, we're imperfect, we harm one another and we have been harmed and we are in need of grace.

So much of this world teaches us to put on strong armor, to walk around with personas that we are sure will keep us safe. And tonight the ashes call... they call us to remember...to remember that we are dependent earthlings formed from dust, and to dust we will return.

Ash Wednesday is the invitation into Lent. Where for the next 40 days, we journey with Jesus, turning our faces towards Jerusalem. Not because we are nothing, but because we are vulnerable people who need to be held in the love and grace of God, brought back to the cross, reminded that we are beloved ones, meant to know the good news and have our lives transformed again and again and evermore.

The other thing that I wanted to remind us of tonight, is that the Christian liturgical calendar begins not in Passover, but in Advent, because the place we begin is the place where Emmanuel, God comes to earth and is with us.

As we prepare for Ash Wednesday, typically churches burn the palm branches from Palm Sunday the year before. We do this symbolically, because it reminds us that we think we know how salvation comes: we think it comes in power, that Jesus was here to blow things up and get rid of the Roman empire. And yet, Jesus comes on a donkey bringing peace. And isn't that just like hope?

“Hope Interrupts,” our Lenten sermon series, is a reminder to us that God shows up not with triumphant sounds or blasts of horns, but in a way much more like a light of a candle that illuminates the dark. And as we hold that light that was born in Advent, and we share it with one another, the brilliance of God’s new morn is birthed both in us and through us and around us, indeed.

In creation and in Sabbath, we are reminded that we are dependent upon the God of the universe who has already been creating, and so we rest. In Passover, we are reminded that we were a people who were enslaved and brought to freedom by this God. In Advent, we are reminded that God has made a home among us, bringing light to our despair and dark. And then, on Ash Wednesday, we are reminded that we are vulnerable and frail and in need...and that we are indeed image bearers of God. The God who is indeed, Emmanuel with us.

And in a world where we know pain and we know sorrow, what if instead of the Lenten journey being a call for us to bear arms and destroy one another, the call of is one that invites us more deeply into the way of Christ, the way of life. For indeed, we are made from dust, to dust we will return. And in between those two moments, we are held by grace of the creator and sustainer of all things, including us. And this allows us to remember so that we might truly live.

So may the hope of Jesus Christ be yours this night. Wherever you are in need, may you know you are not alone in this journey. May we remember. And may we journey with Jesus all the way to Jerusalem and into life. Amen.

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Receive then this benediction: “Blessing the Dust – A Blessing for Ash Wednesday”
(by Jan Richardson).

*All those days
you felt like dust,
like dirt,
as if all you had to do
was turn your face
toward the wind
and be scattered
to the four corners*

*or swept away
by the smallest breath
as insubstantial –*

*did you not know
what the Holy One
can do with dust?*

*This is the day
we freely say
we are scorched.*

*This is the hour
we are marked
by what has made it
through the burning.*

*This is the moment
we ask for the blessing
that lives within
the ancient ashes,
that makes its home
inside the soil of
this sacred earth.*

*So let us be marked
not for sorrow.
And let us be marked
not for shame.
Let us be marked
not for false humility
or for thinking
we are less
than we are*

*but for claiming
what God can do
within the dust,
within the dirt,
within the stuff
of which the world
is made
and the stars that blaze
in our bones
and the galaxies that spiral
inside the smudge
we bear.*

*Amen.*⁴

⁴ Jan Richardson, "Blessing the Dust – A Blessing for Ash Wednesday," *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessing for the Seasons* (Orlando: Wanton Gospeller, 2015), 89.

Hope Interrupts Power

Zechariah 4:1-7

Good morning. My name is Sara, and I am one of the ministers here at Colonial Church. While I am decidedly saddened that we are not able to be present with one another in bodily form, I am grateful that we are able to gather together in our hearts and in love through the gift of technology. And so, welcome this morning; I am grateful to be with you and to see you...even in this virtual way.

As we join together, let us continue in prayer.

Oh, most merciful God, the one who holds and fashions and sustains all of life, hold us now in your hope, in your love, and in your Spirit that we might be your people and that we might love as you love. For it's in Christ's name we gather, amen.

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Virtual show of hands, how many of you would say that Zechariah is your favorite book of the Bible? It doesn't look like there's too many of you, so I'm going to go on a limb here and assume we don't all know a lot about this text, so I'll give you a few thoughts and context about the book of Zechariah.

Zechariah is one of 12 of what the Christian scriptures call the "Minor Prophets"; in the Jewish canon, Zechariah makes up one of the prophets compiled along with 11 others into what is known as "The Twelve".

Zechariah was a prophet. And the particular book that we're looking at today is 14 chapters long. The first chapters (Ch. 1-8), are thought to be written by Zechariah himself and the second half of the book is thought to have been written much later by a prophet(s) following in the tradition of Zechariah. The name Zechariah in and of itself means "God remembered", and the call within Zechariah is to the people to remember God so that God can also live in relationship to them in a way that remembers God's promises and God's covenant with the people of Israel.

Zechariah was writing at a time after the people of Israel had already been carted off by the Babylonians during the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 586/587 BCE. During the original time of exile, the Jewish people suffered under the Babylonian Empire, but then the geopolitical forces shifted, and the Babylonian Empire was supplanted by the Persians. Under Persian rule, there was a different way of thinking about how to relate with the territories they'd conquered, and so instead

of having all of the people carted off to their cities to get them indoctrinated like happened under the rule of Babylon, the Persians actually sought to build goodwill by sending people back to their land, which has just happened for the Israelites at the start of Zechariah.

So under the Persians, the Jews were able to go back to Jerusalem, and were given money and resources to rebuild their temple...although we discover from reading Haggai and Zechariah that the construction on the temple stalled and prophets like Haggai and Zechariah are challenging the people to return to the work at hand. Haggai, in particular, can be summarized as saying to the people: "Hey, listen, you got to get your stuff together and get your priorities right because we need to put YHWH first in all that we are and all that we're doing."

While Haggai and Zechariah are both focused on this temple re-building time, Haggai (which is a lot shorter book) focuses his prophecy on telling people they need to put YHWH first. Zechariah, on the other hand is talking about the ways in which the people of God are called to function in view of the rebuilding of the temple and it's almost like this eschatological state (meaning the end of times), that he is foreseeing as he is calling people to be the people of God, and to live in accordance with the ways of YHWH. He speaks of these things through sharing different visions he's seen which call the people to come back to Yahweh, to rebuild the temple, to live as God's people. So in Zechariah chapters 1-8 is the section of the book where these eschatological visions and prophetic critique are recorded. You can read more about the visions on your own. It's really great, okay? But suffice it to say that's a quick primer on the first eight chapters of Zechariah: prophetic eschatological visions calling the people to get right with God and re-build the temple.

Jumping forward then to the end of the book: most commentators think that the two oracles in Zechariah 9-11 and then recorded in chapters 12-14 are from another one or two subsequent prophets, written one to two centuries after the actual prophet Zechariah was living and this section of the book has more of this sense of connectivity to a messianic figure—the one who will save Israel. A lot of these messianic images in these chapters that are picked up by the New Testament authors, AND (importantly) the New Testament community would have known these Messianic oracles and thus understood Jesus to be the Messiah of whom is spoken about in this book here and prophesied by Zechariah.

I'll say some more about this Messianic connection in a bit, but I first want to make sure to give you some more context about what's happening here in the book of Zechariah. In the middle of Zechariah, as you heard from Christian in his reading of Zechariah 4:1-7, is one of the visions that Zechariah relates to the people. This section is speaking about the governor, Zerubbabel, and this governor, along with the high priest Yehoshua whose name would be translated as Joshua, which means "God saves", which in Greek, Jesus! This is a profound messianic connection: Joshua means "God saves" (the man who led the people into the promised land); then here in

Zechariah the high priest is Yehoshua, which means “God saves”; and then Jesus is the full high priest and ruler in one...who is the embodiment of the God who saves! So much more could be said or written about this, but I’m running out of time... ☺

Suffice it to say that some cool stuff is happening here in Zechariah that is telling the people about how God is at work in the world. The vision in the fourth chapter depicts the rebuilding of the temple and how that will happen, and what we’re told is that it’s not by force nor by strength, but by God’s Spirit that the rebuilding of the temple is going to happen. And we’re told not to despise the small beginnings, for God’s temple is going to be rebuilt, and people are going to be restored, if only they will trust the God who works not by power (like the Empires they are suffering under), but by Spirit (who is in the small beginnings).

That’s a little bit about what’s happening both in the book of Zechariah and particularly in Chapter 4. And I think that central to the message of this book is Zechariah 4:6: a reminder that it’s not by power, nor by might, but by God’s Spirit. It’s a profound reminder to the people and to us about the way that God shows up in the world, doing the work of rebuilding and laboring with a people who are still under the rule of the Persian Empire.

Now keep in mind that these people, they’ve been enslaved, they’ve been oppressed. Remember these are the folks who endured 400 years of slavery in Egypt. They come into the promised land and they built their own kingdom and yet they are then enslaved again. They’re carted off to Babylon. They’ve just come back to their land, but it’s still not theirs, they are vassals of the Persian empire. I imagine they are exhausted and beaten down. They are wondering where God is. They’re longing for God to interrupt the story of what’s been happening in their world. They want God to overthrow these oppressive kingdoms. They want everything to be fine. They want freedom and breath.

Does any of that sound familiar?

We ourselves are in the midst of a global pandemic where the reality is that there is something bigger than us that we can’t on our own just overthrow that’s impacting us and our lives and we too are asking and wondering, where’s a vaccine? Are people on the front lines getting enough of what they need in terms of ventilators and PPE supplies? How do we keep each other as safe as possible? How do we care for the most vulnerable in our midst? And we cry it out, “Oh God, please come!” And Zechariah invites us and reminds us that the way God comes and the way God shows up isn’t just with some lightning bolt that destroys everything or magically cures the whole world...for it’s not my power or by might, but it’s by God’s Spirit of a God who comes in the small things and in the midst of the suffering.

I think there’s something important about this reality that we’re invited to consider even in the midst of this global virus, right? What I mean by that is anything so often in our world we’ve been taught and tutored to believe that we exist as selves onto

our own; that each of us is somehow an autonomous island. And yet here we are: we are, all of us, impacted globally by *one* market in *one* city, which could have been anywhere. And this reveals and lays clear, exposing bare in front of us the fact that no matter how much we want to pretend that we are powerful and safe and strong and able to exist and survive on our own,

we are fundamentally connected

and we are fundamentally vulnerable

and we are fundamentally in need of God and of one another.

And I believe that this laying bare of our vulnerability is actually good news and a reason for hope.

For it isn't by power, no- it isn't by might that we win. It's by love, it's by spirit, it's by breath, it's by awakening to the world as God has created it, to join with God in care and concern for all of our neighbors, to truly love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Yes, the book of Zechariah isn't a place where we often turn inside of the Christian imagination. In fact, in the lectionary, which is a tool that's utilized by churches around the world to help us cycle through reading the Bible, there's only one part of the entire book of Zechariah that is read in public worship: Zechariah 9:9-12. In the section of the text, there's a really interesting line where Zechariah, probably second Zechariah, names that they are prisoners of hope.

What I think is interesting about this is if you turn in your Bible and go read that part of Zechariah, you'll see that it depicts the imagery that we see of Jesus on Palm Sunday, which we're coming to next week, where Jesus comes in as the Messiah, the promised one, riding on a donkey...and imagine for the people at that time what they must have thought. They know this story from Zechariah 9; they know this oracle. They know how this is supposed to go...the Messiah is going to come and overthrow the empire, and here comes Jesus riding on the donkey. They think: "Here we go. Jesus is coming. He's going to overthrow the Roman Empire, he's going to start a revolution and win and the promised freedom is going to happen!"

But if you look at Zechariah and the story that the people were anticipating versus what Jesus *actually* does, you'll see that Jesus absolutely does embody the first verses on Palm Sunday through to Easter, but when you look at the second section of that passage, you see that Jesus *doesn't follow the script* for there's this sense in Zechariah 9 that when the Messiah comes, there will be a violent overturning of the ways of this world and that is the oracle that the prophet hopes for and longs for...as do people in Jesus' time (as we do too, right?). And yet, as was pointed out in a commentary on *Working Preacher* by Margaret Odell, there's something important about this "prisoner of hope" line in verse 12 because it isn't the kind of normative

hope we read about in scripture, which is the waiting for God to show up. No, the word here for hope is *tiqveh*, which is connected to false expectations. Dr. Odell thus invites us to see that verse 12 names the sense that the people and the prophet had that God would show up and just overthrow, which is precisely what the people at Jesus's time were hoping for. For once again, the people of Israel found themselves underneath the rule and occupation of a foreign nation. This time it was the Roman Empire. So when Jesus comes into Jerusalem--as we will celebrate on Palm Sunday--the people spread their cloaks, crying, "Hosanna, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord," they're thinking Jesus is going to come and get rid of the Roman Empire... but yet that's not what happens. When Jesus comes, he comes riding on a donkey of peace, not on a warrior horse, and in so doing Jesus reminds us about something that Zechariah 4:6 already told us: That God's coming isn't by power or by might, but it is by Spirit that God shows up. He is the one who will "proclaim peace of the nations; the empire stretching from sea to sea, from the river to the ends of the earth (Zech. 9:10)."¹

And likewise, we sometimes become prisoners of the wrong kind of hope. A hope that tells us if only we can be more in control, if only we can have more resources, if only we can be more powerful, *then* we will be safe. **But hope interrupts** those pretensions and grasps for power that tells us, yes, we are vulnerable, and yes, we are frail, but is this not a thing of beauty? For we were created into a world that was already made by a loving creator and then the day after our creation in the story about humans on earth in Genesis, we're told that God rested the day after we were created and we get to be held and sustained by this God of love and life and love.

For it was never by our striving or our strength that we were able to breathe, but it was in the resting and trusting in the God who had already fashioned all of life and turning towards one another and this creation with gratitude and thanksgiving, with humility and rightly orienting ourselves so that we might be a people of hope, who bear witness to a kingdom that comes not in power or in might, but a kingdom that comes through spirit and in love to heal, to renew, and to restore...this is how we were meant to live and be free.

Now, of course, when you have a narrative that tells you that the kingdom coming or getting ahead comes through power then it's profoundly disorienting and it's scary and risky to all of a sudden be invited into a different type of story. So it's no surprise as we look forward to Palm Sunday that the people who say, "Hosanna, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord," very quickly thereafter, were plotting to kill Jesus once they realized that the kind of kingdom that Jesus was bringing was not one of power, not one of military strength, nor one of revolutionary violent rebellion, but was one that was more beautiful and more fraught and more of hope and possibility...pregnant with new worlds that together as the church and the people of God, laboring with God's Spirit, we have been able to midwife throughout

¹ Margaret Odell, "Commentary on Zechariah 9:9-12," *Working Preacher*. Accessed online: https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2142

history.

And so once again, the truth is exposed before us: our lives are not separate from one another, our breath is not disconnected. What happens in China or Sri Lanka or Cambodia or Mexico or Minnesota (which is not a country, I realize) or in the United States or Italy or England or Zimbabwe impacts us all. We are all a people fashioned and created by a loving God who holds this entire world and is breathing and inviting and challenging us by God's Spirit to join with God in this new way of being human...A way of being human which acknowledges that our frailty and our vulnerability is not a thing to be overcome, but a thing that actually opens us to God, to love, and to one another. And this is a thing of hope that interrupts power.

As I was working on this sermon I was reminded of a song from when I was a kid. It's a song by Rich Mullins called "We Are Not As Strong As We Think We Are." The lyrics read:

Well, it took the hand of God Almighty
To part the waters of the sea
But it only took one little lie
To separate you and me
Oh, we are not as strong as we think we are
And they say that one day Joshua
Made the sun stand still in the sky
But I can't even keep these thoughts of you from passing by
Oh, we are not as strong as we think we are
We are frail, we are fearfully and wonderfully made
Forged in the fires of human passion
Choking on the fumes of selfish rage
And with these our hells and our heavens
So few inches apart
We must be awfully small
And not as strong as we think we are.²

These lyrics are an invitation and a reminder to us that we are human. We are frail, *but* we are fearfully made. And so, instead of trying to turn from or escape our vulnerability or building up our own kingdoms or looking to rulers to save us, we are instead invited into a hope that interrupts reminding us that it's not power or might, but it's by Spirit that we were meant to LIVE.

Living by Spirit is loving our neighbors as ourselves. It's found in front line workers who care for people in the midst of their inability to breathe. It's scientists who are searching for cures. It's folks I've seen on Twitter who say, "Anybody need money? I have \$2,000 for the next 20 people who need 100 bucks for groceries." We are frail, we are vulnerable, and we are in need. **But that's the point.**

² Rich Mullins, "We are Not as Strong as We Think We Are," from *Songs* (Nashville: Reunion Records), 1996.

My mentor and dissertation advisor, Hille Haker, delivered a lecture in 2016 at AAP on Vulnerable Agency. In it she contrasted her work and invitation to recognition of vulnerability inside of the tradition inside of philosophy that has told us we are on our own, that through being rational beings we are able to conquer all things, and she invites us to think about our agency as both vulnerable and thereby also a thing of beauty and how we are then human and how we care for one another and the most vulnerable in our midst.³ For yes, vulnerability reminds us that we are able to be wounded, but it's not thus the thing to be avoided. It the thing that makes way for an openness that opens us to God, that opens us to love, that opens us to one another. It invites us to see one another, to be in solidarity with one another, and to care for the least of these who are the most vulnerable in our midst.

This last week, Pope Francis picked up the same invitation at his prayer gathering for the end of coronavirus and for all of the world (that he hosted in a completely empty square due to the drastic quarantine measures in Italy). He said:

"The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities. It shows us how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish and sustain and strengthen our lives and our communities....In this storm, the facade of those stereotypes with which we have camouflaged our egos, always worrying about our image, has fallen away uncovering once more that blessed common belonging of which we cannot be deprived: our belonging as sisters and as brothers."⁴

As painful and as real as this virus and global pandemic is, and as much as I wish it weren't the case, and as much as we join together to pray for healing, for vaccines, for safety, for wellbeing...we also have an invitation, I believe, in the midst of this moment to refuse to turn to power. In our fear let us not turn to thinking we are the only ones who matter or to keeping only ourselves safe, but instead might we let God's Spirit breathe and open us up to one another so that we might recognize that the way God's kingdom comes, the way hope interrupts is that it comes in like a little mustard seed that through its love and tender liminality brings forth new life. Let us not despise these small things but follow the God who is Spirit.

And I don't know about you, but I want to be a person of hope and mustard seed faith and spirit-inspired life in this season. I want to be reawakened to the knowing and the reality of how God is at work in our midst. I want to see and pay attention to how the kingdom we pray for and long for is already at hand. And so even as we gather virtually while remaining distant in body, we reach our hands to one another

³ Hille Haker, "Vulnerable Agency," Delivered at the Australian Academy of Philosophy (July 4, 2016). Accessible online: https://www.academia.edu/31651801/Vulnerable_Agency_AAP_lecture_2016_hhaker.pdf

⁴ Pope Francis, "Urbi et Orbi (To the City and the World)", Homily delivered at St. Peter's Square, Italy (March 27, 2020), accessed online: https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/03/27/rea.d-pope-francis-urbi-et-orbi-address-coronavirus-and-jesus-calming-storm?fbclid=IwAR2wSFNHGI0jn3SHYF8bHZ2IBmMTJ3WRwhWeTlhecSidymnwN2TZti_ijW4

and open our hands to this God who is Spirit. This is the God who invites us into hope. The God who reminds us that our littlest action for good matters. For to be a good neighbor doesn't mean we're tasked with having to save the whole world, but we are called to show love and kindness: To be the people of God, to be the church by the way we live and order our lives in accordance with the God who says and who remembers all of the people who suffer and long for health and freedom and life. For God shows up not in power or in might but is already at work with us in the midst of the suffering, working by Spirit to care and heal and breathe on all of us.

I haven't yet told you, but I knew the verse from Zechariah 4:6 since I was a little girl on account of my Grandma, "G". I distinctly remember her, sitting at her round kitchen table with her Bible and her teaching me a song "Not by power, nor by might, but by my Spirit." And I always loved this verse on account of her. Well, I wanted to say a bit more about how my Grandma animates this gospel truth that God comes not in power buy by Sprit.

A a couple of years ago, during Women's History Month (of which this is the last Sunday), my spouse, Andy, gave me a picture every day of a famous woman from history along with a famous quote from this woman. He included women like Audre Lorde and Gloria Steinem and Billie Holiday. On International Women's Day though, Andy gave me the most important woman in my life. It was a picture of my grandma, "G", as I called her, and her famous quote was, "I love you, Baber." What I love about him giving me a picture of my G on International Women's Day is that though I'm so grateful for the women throughout history whose names we remember, women tennis players, scientists, and leaders of all forms, and their lives have made mine possible, the most important woman in my world in a woman who will not be included in anyone else's list of important figures from Women's History. The most important woman in my life's famous quote was the woman who regularly told me she loved me. And this matters because, as Audre Lorde reminds us, you don't destroy the master's house by using the master's tools; we don't build a new kingdom of heaven by looking to the kingdom of earth as a template for salvation.⁵

For the way God's kingdom comes that is not power or might or through names that we remember across national or international boundaries. It comes through people like my grandma who showed up for me, who reminded me I was loved, who fed and clothed me, who cared for me and my brother. This is why although I wish I could fix and save everything and come up with the cure for the Coronavirus to save us all from suffering, I am reminded as I so often have been in the midst of Zoom prayer meetings and conversations in these last weeks as I find myself crying, that it is in gatherings like those with real people who choose love in the face of fear and show up for their neighbors that God comes on earth.

God comes in the midst of you who gather across social media platforms, you who

⁵ Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, 110- 114 (New York: Ten Speed Press, 2007).

have chosen to withdraw from public life so that the most vulnerable in our midst might have life. *This* is how God's Spirit functions and how God's hope interrupts. It's a hope that interrupts power. A hope that brings us back to life. A hope that invites us to be human together. A hope invites us to remember our vulnerability and our being connected with each other so that we might be a people who truly then love God and love neighbor as ourselves because we know what it means to be loved in our vulnerability and frailty; we know what it is to live not by power nor by might, but by God's Spirit. This is how the kingdom comes, through people who are awakened to the hope that interrupts power and invites us all to live in the midst of our vulnerability as people of Spirit.

So my friends, might we be people who open our hands, let go of any of the grasping for power and instead turn our hearts, our bodies, and our whole lives to the God who was and is and is to come, and in so doing, open ourselves to the whole wide world that love might be our song, that life might be our anthem, and that freedom and breath and healing might indeed be a kingdom for everyone.

Let us pray together.

Loving God in the season of Lent, in the midst of all that we hold in our hearts, will you open us again? Will you renew us? Might we, oh God, take this moment as an invitation to move more deeply in, to love more radically than we had before, and to look for and to participate in the kingdom that comes not by power nor by might, but riding on a donkey, bringing peace on earth. Oh Christ, be near to our whole word and our hearts. Amen.

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Benediction

A few weeks ago, my spouse and I had the opportunity to sit down with Janet Hagberg over dinner as she was mourning the recent death of a young man who was like a son to her. As we sat together, she pulled out Steve Spangler's Science Energy Stick (you can get on Amazon for \$7.99!).⁶ She demonstrated something that filled my heart with giddy joy, as she grabbed each end and suddenly the lights began to flash as an electrical current ran through the magic energy stick. Then she invited us to do join her.

I took her hand, then she took Andy's, and together we formed a circle of three connected by this energy stick! And you know what? The light went on again, reminding us that we can indeed clench our fists in times like these and hold power for ourselves thinking it will keep us safe...and sure there is something to that, that clenching our hands to harness our own power will, indeed, make a spark.

⁶ Access Online: <https://www.amazon.com/Steve-Spangler-Science-Energy-Hands/dp/B07RHWJP4R>.

But this is not the way we are invited to live, nor is it the truth of how Christ invites us to be the church. We are to be a people who, like we do every Sunday, extend our hands to one another and thereby to the world to grasp one another's hands, completing the circle, reminding each other that it is not by power nor by might, but by God's Spirit in and through us as we hold one another, that the light shines, that the energy sparks, and that the world is healed.

So go forth, my friends, with hands extended in open invitation to all of our neighbors and to the God of all life whose hope interrupts and fills us by God's Spirit, that we indeed might be a people who join with Christ in journeying towards Jerusalem, bearing witness to this life! Go in the love of God, the fellowship of the Spirit, and the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Peace to you, my friends. Amen.



Good Friday

Mark 15:40-47

40 There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. 41 These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

42 When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath, 43 Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. 44 Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. 45 When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. 46 Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. 47 Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid.

- Mark 15:40-47

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As we finish out the readings from Mark 15, we are brought into a place that is both similar and dissimilar to our current moment. Of course, the situation is different in many ways. We have not seen Jesus walk in flesh. We have not come from far and wide, waiting at the tomb wondering if he will rise. Yet in many other ways, aspects of our story are the same.

We are told that at this moment in the text, the women who have followed Jesus are at a distance. And how like them are we, a people who with bated breath, are watching from our homes, wondering what will happen, longing for the days when we could do things...like go to dinner at a restaurant or actually hug our neighbors (maybe even ones we've never hugged before).

And how many of us are like Joseph of Arimathea, respected members of our communities who are awaiting the coming kingdom of God, looking and longing for it? And how many of our leaders are asking questions about life and death, looking to doctors and scientists to help us understand something that doesn't make sense?

And so here on this night, thousands of years removed from the story of these people who journeyed with Jesus, we ourselves are likewise journeying with Jesus. Whether watching from afar, whether looking for the kingdom of God, whether asking questions of where and how long and what is next...we are a people who, like



these friends of old, look to the place where Jesus' body was and is laid again...
longing and praying and working for resurrection life.

So let us not forget where this Jesus lives and resides. Let us not forget about the
bodies of our neighbors who are even refrigerated awaiting their own burial in our
time.¹

Let us remember.

And let us then long for the morning when Jesus indeed does and will rise again.
And in that space, we join with Jesus and all of our neighbors in proclaiming and
living that resurrection life, coming out from the shadows and from our homes, not
only looking and longing for the kingdom of God, but being bringers of it.

Oh, Jesus, on this night, we look for you and we remember.

Amen.

¹ Jeremy Rose, "As an ER Doctor, I Fear Our Era's Defining Symbol Will be the Refrigerator Truck,"
Washington Post (April 11, 2020). Accessed online:
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/04/11/refrigerated-truck-morgue-coronavirus/>.



Hope Interrupts Death

Matthew 27:45 – 28:10

Well, good morning and a blessed Easter morn to you. For the next 20 minutes, you have an opportunity to journey with Christ into this new morn of Easter. Together, we will journey with this Jesus, looking for the hope that interrupts death. So if you would, either get ready and get on your shoes and go outside for a walk for 20 minutes, or grab a cup of coffee, maybe you sit by your window. And let's together look for and anticipate the risen Christ, who is our life and our hope, as we await for and look for the dawn.

Well, good morning. I'm Sarah, one of the ministers at Colonial Church, and it is a joy to be able to journey with you on this Easter morn, as we together look for the risen Christ. So, let's begin the journey together.

On that night when Jesus was betrayed, his disciples began to scatter. And they had good reasons for doing so. They had been looking for and longing for the promised Messiah, the one who would redeem Israel and save them from the bondage and oppression of life under the Roman Empire. Here was this Jesus, whom they loved, for whom they had risked everything, in whom they believed. And yet, he was turned over to the authorities. And yet he was crucified.

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At about three o'clock, Jesus cried out with a loud voice, [foreign language 00:02:04]. That is, "My God, my God. Why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "This man is calling for Elijah." At once, one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him." Then Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and breathed his last.

At that moment, the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection, they came out of the tombs and entered the Holy City and appeared to many. Now, when the Centurion and those with him who were keeping watch over Jesus saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly, this man was God's son."

The passage that Mark just read is from Matthew 27, 45 through 54. You know, sometimes when I read the Bible, I forget to really look at it as something that these real people experienced. I mean, take a minute, put yourself in their shoes. These



people, they're living under Roman occupation. Their people had a long history of going from one empire to the next and always being oppressed, yet forever crying out to God to save them. And here's this Jesus and you've met him. And you believe that he's the one, the Messiah, the one who indeed will save Israel. Will throw off the yoke of oppression, right? I mean, didn't he say this? Take my yoke? Well, of course we're taking it because we're throwing everything else off. And yet... Yet here we are.

Jesus has been picked up by the Roman authorities, he's now being crucified. I mean, what is going to happen? You're locked up in a separate room. You're hiding for your life -- you're, you're terrified! What happens if the Romans come for me next? I mean, Jesus was being killed for being a political dissident. He was dangerous in view of the empire. And you were part of that because you believed that God's kingdom and God's world was coming and breaking into our world. And yet here you are. And this cry of Jesus is probably your cry as well. "My God, my God. Why have you forsaken me?" Right?

The pain and the agony that maybe doesn't go to death, like death on a cross, but death of its own kind. When we reach the end of ourselves and say, "God, where are you?" In that moment though, when Jesus opened up his whole self and gave up his life, the curtain was torn. And in Matthew naming this, he's reminding and inviting us all to see the way that Jesus made manifest God's spirit on earth for and in and through all of us. But of course, if you're one of Jesus's disciples, you might not know this yet.

And that's so often the way life works. We continue forward and hope. And even sometimes in hopelessness, put one foot in front of the other, we continue on. And then we discover that actually the world has already changed and hope is reborn again. So how about you? Where in your life as we together look for the rising sun of this new Easter morn, are you in need of God's coming in? Of opening your hands. Of surrendering the places where you have, and known what it means to be forsaken. Giving up your spirit, giving up our spirits. We look, and long for this blessed morn.

Many women were also there looking on from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee and provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea named Joseph, who was also a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilot and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilot ordered it to be given to him. So Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn in the rock. He then rolled a great stone to the door of the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there, sitting opposite of the tomb.

This morning, whether you're outside walking or you're sitting with some tea or coffee. Whatever you're doing, it's probably from a distance. And we have good reasons for why we're distancing now, to keep one another and ourselves and those we love safe. Likewise, in this passage, again, from the book of Matthew 27, this time



from later on in the passage, starting with verse 55, all the way through 61. This tells the story of the women who also were looking on from the distance, because they had followed Jesus and they had provided for Jesus. But now this time was not only uncertain, it was fraught. And so, from a distance they observed and I'm sure prayed and grieved and longed for another day. Would Jesus himself rise from the dead? Was this the end of the story?

They weren't close, but yet still they were there. For me, in these blessed weeks, remembering that even though we cannot be together in body, that our spirits and our lives are still intertwined, and that it is indeed a great act of love at time to watch from a distance, because it does come at a cost to ourselves. And no less for these women, for they were ones who had been marked. They were followers of Jesus. So might we, as we look for this Easter morn, be a people who even though distant in some ways, look for, and just like Mary and the other Mary, sit expectantly, prayerfully, anticipating that indeed the great stone that is the door of the tomb is not the end of the story, but it is the place where new life might be reborn. Do you see it?

The next day, that is, after the day of preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilot and said, "Sir, we remember what that imposter said while he was still alive. After three days, I will rise again." Therefore, command the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away and tell the people he has been raised from the dead, and the last deception would be worse than the first. Pilot said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers, go. Make it as secure as you can." So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone.

Do you think this passage is a little funny too? I mean, seriously, the folks were so worried that Jesus might imposter it up and suddenly be appearing around town as dead, but not dead. I mean, when does that happen? But just to make sure, really, really sure, they sealed it up. They wanted to be sure that there was no way that these Jewish underlings could possibly say that their King had risen, and so we better lock it down and make sure to keep that stuff down. And you know, the funny thing is, it's just like in our lives. Any time we try to push something down, it pops up somehow in another way.

Because whether it's things that we're trying to find healing for in our own stories, or whether it's parts of our truest selves, who Christ has made us to be, these parts of us desire to be free. And in the same or similar sort of way, it didn't matter what the authorities tried to do to keep Jesus locked in. Life and truth and love was going to triumph. And when even through the dark night, it appeared that there was no possible way, if you just wait for chapter 28, you get to hear what happens next.

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake for an angel, the Lord, ascending from Heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat



on it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him, the guard shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay, then go quickly and tell his disciples, he has been raised from the dead. And indeed, he is going ahead of you to Galilee. There, you will see him. This is my message for you."

So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings." And they came to him, took hold of his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid, go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee. There, they will see me."

How are you doing? Do you notice how you're feeling right now? I mean, the story just radically, radically turned. This is the point of hope interrupts death. It's here. These women, they went to the tomb and there was an earthquake. And suddenly, there Jesus is. And I mean, could you even imagine? He's there in the flesh and they left with joy and they ran to tell the disciples. Jesus told them to go, to tell everyone the news that had happened, that indeed the tomb hadn't been the end of the story, that indeed hope interrupted death itself. My body right now is feeling chills of emotion. Because at the end of the day, for me, part of why I am a Christian and claim the name of Christ, is because I believe in resurrection.

The resurrection life that God has shown and promised and given in Christ is true and can be ours, in big ways, and in small. Where we reach the end of the places where we know how a new future might begin to be possible. And yet, there it is. And yet, the morn comes again and the sun is new with its mercies, and hope lives and flourishes. And we have breath, and maybe coffee or the ability to walk, or the ability to have somewhere to sit, or just all of these things are miracles and Mercies, anew of life.

"Greetings," Jesus says. "Greetings," Jesus says to you. "Don't be afraid. You will see me." Do you see Jesus? Do you see this resurrection morn? Do not be afraid, dear friends. For resurrection life is here in our midst and anew right now. Thus together we cry and proclaim, Christ is risen.

He has risen, indeed. Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

What song wells up in your heart? Do you hear the trees or see the whisper of the new morn, together crying as we proclaim? (singing)

Oh good Easter morn, Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Let us pause to pray and give thanks, potentially with arms outstretched and or in our hearts. Take in the wonder of this new creation, embrace this resurrection life and morn. And let us join with this Jesus in being people who live this resurrection life, praying together the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples.



Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day, our coming days bread and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us on to trial, deliver us from the evil one. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Well, we've done it. Together, we have welcomed the new morn, and celebrated Easter sunrise. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. So go forth in this new resurrection life. Be those who are on the lookout for Jesus. And be those who love our neighbors as ourselves. Even as today, we remain distance. May we go forth knowing that we go not alone, but we go in the hope and the love, of the God of all life. Recieve now, this benediction and blessing.

Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives, do not let your hearts be troubled. Do not be afraid.

Grace Actually Sees

Luke 19:1-20

1 He entered Jericho and was passing through it. 2 A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. 3 He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. 5 When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." 6 So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. 7 All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." 8 Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." 9 Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

- Luke 19:1-10 (NRSV)

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Good morning! My name is Sara and I'm so glad to be able to be here with you in worship today. This morning as we enter our new series this Easter season, "Grace, Actually," we invite you to journey with us from now until Pentecost, as we both look for the risen Christ and also seek the work of God's Spirit in our lives and in our world.

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Will you pray with me?

Oh, risen Christ, on this day may you meet us: that we might know your grace; that we might know your love; that we might be your people, and indeed be the church in the world. God, grant us wisdom so that even as we are distributed and watching from our homes, that you oh God, by your Spirit might meet us, that we might live in your love and be your witnesses to a kingdom that comes by spirit and by love. For it's in Christ's name that we gather and we pray.

Amen.

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In some ways it seems like it was a lifetime ago, and in other ways it feels like it was just yesterday that I had a wonderful evening gathered together with women in our

Gratitude Bible Study here in this very room around this very fire (if you know anything about me, you know that I love a good fire). Together we talked about Scripture and about what it means to be people of gratitude who live our lives in response to God's grace.

Later that evening, as a good millennial, I went on Twitter and I tweeted Diana Butler Bass, the author of the book *Grateful* that we've been journeying with and let her know something that seemed wonderful and profound in the midst of our conversation earlier that night. Much to my delight, she tweeted me back! I was feeling pretty cool, really grateful, indeed. That was on Monday.¹

By Thursday of that very same week, in the midst of the afternoon gathering with the moderators and Jeff Lindsay and myself, it became clear that the coronavirus was going to begin deeply touching our lives here in Minnesota. We knew that we were going to have to pivot to discern how we could be church in this time -- that we could still do community and be the church in view of a global pandemic.

And so we immediately began putting things in place so we could Zoom our gatherings and could go online for services. We are so grateful for the ways that we, our community distributed, have been able to gather for prayer, for worship, and for study. And if you haven't yet forayed into these online gathering spaces, we invite you to join us. I love and am so grateful for these times to be together.

Suffice it to say that I've never wanted to hug my computer more than I have in the last few weeks! Just seeing people other than Andy Garbers, who I love, and my dog Blue, is a gift. So when our study re-gathered the next Monday via Zoom to journey further into this book about gratitude, that evening I so clearly knew what I wanted to bring forward to preach about in the midst of this, our new sermon series called "Grace, Actually."

The connection between grace and gratitude and being a people who are able to receive grace -- to notice it all around us, and then to live our lives in response -- is a connection that is symbiotic.

So today I wanted us to spend some time with a story that some of you know, some of you don't, to hear it anew and afresh...to consider how in this time of a global pandemic we can continue becoming more of the people that Christ invites us to be in the world. What does it mean to be a people who live in grace, who breathe God's Spirit and who then say, "Grace actually changes us. Grace actually invites us to breathe. Grace actually reminds us that we have our daily bread even when it doesn't feel like that."

So... welcome to our sermon series from now through Pentecost called: "Grace,

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018).

Actually.”

Today, let's consider how “Grace Actually Sees.”

When I was a little girl at my grandma's house, I had a Zacchaeus doll. It was a flip story doll that had parts of the story written on a two-circle-head snowperson-like Zacchaeus figure.

I learned the song about Zacchaeus just like any good kid who knows the Zacchaeus song - “Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he. He climbed up in the sycamore tree the good Lord for to see. And along comes Jesus and he says, ‘Hey, Zacchaeus. I'm coming to your house today.’” And so indeed Zacchaeus comes down... yada yada...you know the rest of the story as was read for our scripture passage today.

Now, even when I was a kid and I heard this story I felt bad for Zacchaeus because I thought... “oh, he was short and stuff.” And there's nothing worse than being a short guy, right (I guess this is what I learned when I was a kid). And honestly, I think that's been my interpretation of this text for the majority of my life -- poor Zacchaeus he was hated because he was a sinner and a tax collector. I don't really know what's so bad about that, but I guess he was short and that was a problem? And so Jesus sees him one day and says, “Come on down.” And everyone's real mad. And then Jesus is like, “It's all okay”. And it is...so it's a good story: Jesus loves people. Jesus loves even short tax collectors. Okay, I got it!

So here we I am in the midst of this gratitude study with a wonderful group of women who are now gathered together as a community on Zoom talking about gratitude. And we come to the point in Diana Butler Bass' book *Grateful* when she revisits the Zacchaeus story and invites us to see it in the midst of God's economy of grace—arguing how grace actually changes us and the way that we live our lives and the way that we're able to be the church and to show up in the world.

So in conversation with her work on this text I want to share a little bit about how we might think about the story of Zacchaeus. In the last few years, I've become increasingly convinced that so much of what the people of Israel longed for in the promised Messiah was political freedom because most of the history of the people of Israel they was lived in cyclical cycles of oppression.

Whether we go way back to the story of the God who heard the cries of God's people when they were enslaved in Egypt and brought them out of that land into the promised land and freedom, or the stories we know of how when the people were in the promised land and they had forgotten the God who saved them and forgotten their role as the people of God in the land and they again experienced enslavement at the hands of the Babylonian Empire and then the Persian Empire...this was a story of a people who knew oppression and longed for freedom in all of its forms.

Of course, the story doesn't end there because by the time we get to Jesus' time, the Jewish people are living under Roman occupation. And in this environment they were an enslaved people, they were oppressed, they didn't have the same rights as the Romans, and this is the context into which Jesus is born. If you want to hear more about this story, you can just revisit our previous sermons on Facebook or YouTube streams to hear more context about these weeks leading up to Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem.

On Palm Sunday, when the people experienced Jesus entering the city, it is clear that they think his coming will be the triumphant moment when God and the promised Messiah will save them in every single way...because inside of Jewish thinking, the way salvation comes, *Shalom*, God's peace, it comes as a holistic salvation that frees us spiritually, politically, and psychologically so that we can live as God's people.

They are longing for *Shalom-salvation*.

As an oppressed people they had been crying out to God saying, "God, do you not hear us? Will you not save us?" And they've heard rumblings of this radical man who feeds the many, walks on water, performs miracles, and heals those outcasts by society. And you've got to think so many of them are exclaiming, "This is the guy! This is the Messiah! Did you hear? Do you know? He's coming to Jerusalem. Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" and they lay down their palm branches (scholars think that palm branches were a symbol of the Maccabean rebellion and any depictions of palm branches were a signal to let people know, "The revolution is coming!"). They think Jesus is going to overthrow the Roman Empire through political revolution and bring them freedom.

Now, of course Jesus is all about the revolution. It's just not the kind that they (or we) think it's going to be, right? Because the way that Jesus shows up and the way God's kingdom works is that it doesn't function according to the normative power politics of our world (right? Jesus comes on a donkey, not a war horse), which in some ways isn't that different today from back in the day during the Roman Empire. We too so often look for Jesus in power and political revolution that we recognize as such, but God's kingdom works differently than that. Its revolution comes by Spirit and brings true *shalom-salvation*.

Back to our story: in comes Jesus and the streets --in the middle of this passage in Luke 19-- the streets are lined with people. These people are probably thinking, "Hey, I want to get out and get a glimpse of this guy who I've heard about!" Some of them are longing for the revolution. Some of them probably think, "Oh no, is this guy going to cause problems? Will he disrupt the peace?" We don't know all of the reasons people came, but we know they did come to see who this Jesus was.

And in this moment, as Jesus is going down the road with all of the people thronging him, he looks up and, the text tells us, he sees this man --a tax collector-- a man named Zacchaeus, and he invites him to come down from his tree as Jesus declares

he's going to go to Zacchaeus' home for dinner.

Let's talk a little bit about being a tax collector during this time. Now as it turns out, being a "tax collector" and "sinner" are indeed made synonymous here in Luke 19, but to understand a little bit more about what this means invites us to think again about the context. Imagine: you're a people who are oppressed under the Roman Empire. You are poor. You're probably struggling. You don't have the same rights as your Roman overlords, right? And then one from amongst you decides he wants to get ahead a little bit because he knows what it is to be a person who's oppressed and so he becomes a tax collector...because as a tax collector, you can take some money off the top from the people who give their taxes to the Roman Empire.

And then the Romans also know that you're going to skim some off the top, so you're distrusted by the Romans because you're not actually Roman, you're Jewish, so you're not equivalent to them. But you're also hated by your own people because you betrayed them to the occupying nation. So this Zacchaeus is a man who represents a class of people who are despised by everyone.

You know, sometimes when I read the Bible, it's easy to get judgmental about why people make their decisions. So I'll be reading along and think, "If I were Peter in the boat, I'd totally get out, go on the water and be like, 'Hi, Jesus. I see you. I'm totally cool.'" Yet the reality is that the people in the Bible are just like you and me - they are real people, people who are doing the best that they can, people who are afraid, people who don't know what will happen, people who don't know what will occur when they go out to get groceries, right? People who maybe have been locked in their homes for fear, people who are longing for a different life or world and aren't sure if it will come. And so when I rehear this story of Zacchaeus, I feel a lot of empathy for him.

He has good reasons for becoming a tax collector. Who wants to waste away in poverty? Who wants their family to not have enough to eat? I don't. And so he does what he can to try to get ahead, to try to make sure he's going to be okay in the midst of an economy and a world which didn't have enough for him.

We don't know why he comes to see Jesus. We know he can't see because he was short. But he is also thinking about that sycamore tree and climbing -- that's something he'd probably been doing his whole life. He'd been finding ways to climb out from the mire of the people who were all just waiting and longing for freedom and salvation from God. And he climbs up because he's going to get his and then Jesus sees him and says, "Come on down!"

Have you ever been in that place where you have really good reasons for being the way that you are? You have reasons that you learned from growing up: that there wasn't enough for you, that you couldn't actually be who you are... and suddenly, you're seen by Jesus and you know you can open your hands and surrender and just trust. I know I've learned this again and again. For me in my own story it's about how I learned to be a good girl and be good at school and strive as hard as I could to be

perfect.

But then--again and again I hear God's Spirit through Christ saying to me up in my little tree that I've learned to climb because of all the ways I've been made to feel short or less than, "Sara, come down, sweetie. Breathe and know that there is enough. I'm here to save you."

Right?

And here is part of what I love about this story of Zacchaeus -- you've got to believe that most of the people lining those streets, as Luke reminds us, weren't particularly happy that Jesus sees him and invites himself to dinner at his house, right? Zacchaeus is that rich dude. He oppresses us and he's terrible. He's sold out to the empire. He doesn't deserve being chosen by the one whose supposed to bring the revolution.

But Jesus doesn't respond that way. He refuses the political engagement of his time just like he does in ours. He embodies a different way...where we don't just get to name call each other and pretend that some of us are outside of God's grace, because the grace of God, going back through the entire Scriptures, is the God of *EI Roi*, the *God who sees*. And grace sees every single one of us and says there is a place in God's kingdom for each of us to experience and know grace, actually.

If you just flip back a little bit in the book of Luke, you'll see that there was the story of the rich young ruler who went away sad because he didn't think that he could live the way that Jesus was inviting him to. And yet the next story we hear is the story of another rich person, who through being seen by Jesus, is brought into a place where he is part of the kingdom. He reawakens to the fact that this God has always seen him. And Jesus comes to his dinner table. And it's through that table fellowship of sitting over a meal that his life is changed and transformed.

I wonder about this for us. Our own anxieties and fears get triggered in times of global pandemics -- and if you have no anxiety, then God bless you because some of this is really hard. I wonder, in this time, how can we be a people who instead of living out of those places of fear and scarcity, live our lives more deeply in alignment with the God who sees, with the God whose economy is one of grace, one where there is enough at this table from which each of us might partake, where rich and poor and strong and weak and all of us in between are invited to come down from our trees or to rise up from the streets where we shake our fists and to find ourselves together at one banquet table with the God of all things...who in Christ extends the *grace that sees us*?

My friends, in this time, as you notice your own fear and the anxiety your feeling or the ways you're climbing some trees for good reasons, may we be a people who open our hearts to be seen by this grace and this love of God in Christ. And as we are seen, may we then be a people who see one another, who seek to be the church,

to join with others in doing good for Christ's sake, and to loving in the same way that Jesus has loved, bringing a kingdom with grace enough for everyone.

Grace, actually.

Grace for today, grace for tomorrow. There is grace enough, my friends.

May the God who sees, see you and may you know that you are seen.
Go in that peace and in that love and that grace, for Grace Actually Sees.

Amen.



Grace Actually Makes Us Bold

Ruth 1:1-14; 18-22

¹In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. ²The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. ³But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, ⁵both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the Lord had considered his people and given them food. ⁷So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. ⁸But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. ⁹The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. ¹⁰They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people."

¹¹But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? ¹²Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, ¹³would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me." ¹⁴Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her.

¹⁸When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her. ¹⁹So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. When they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them; and the women said, "Is this Naomi?" ²⁰She said to them,

*"Call me no longer Naomi,
call me Mara,*



*for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me.
21 I went away full,
but the Lord has brought me back empty;
why call me Naomi
when the Lord has dealt harshly with me,
and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?"*

22 So Naomi returned together with Ruth the Moabite, her daughter-in-law, who came back with her from the country of Moab. They came to Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest.

- Ruth 1:1-14; 18-22

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Good morning. My name's Sara and I'm one of the ministers here at Colonial Church. As you've heard, in these weeks we are in the midst of a sermon series called "Grace, Actually." Today we're going to talk about how "Grace Actually Makes Us Bold" and in order to do so this week and then also next week we will be spending some time in a biblical text that goes by the name Ruth.

Ruth is the story about women who lived in the midst of a challenging time...and how many of us do not know the realities of what it feels like to live in the midst of a globe that has been experiencing a pandemic... seeking to orient ourselves to things to which honestly, how do you orient? And yet here you are. And here I am. We're still existing and breathing and loving and seeking the good of God in our world and for and with our neighbors.

And so today (and also next week) we're going to journey with these women as they seek to understand and make sense of a world and how they can indeed not only survive, but flourish in it. So as we turn to their stories, looking for the evidence and the invitations to live in grace, let us pray together.

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God, I thank you that you are and have been present through all of human history, that indeed ours is not the first moment of global disorientation. Ours is not the only place or location, even in our current world, where people have known the challenges of constraint. So God, in these next couple of weeks as we journey with these women and their stories and how you showed up, might we be a people who look for and pay attention to the ways in which you are showing up in our lives. May you, by your Spirit give us grace, grace enough and grace actually for this day, for this moment; for indeed your grace is sufficient. So open us and awaken us to the grace that actually can make us bold. For it's in Christ's name that we gather, live, move, and breathe.

Amen.



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So the book of Ruth is a really great story for many reasons, not least of which is that it takes place in only four chapters. So if you're looking for a quick, easy read in the Bible, you can start with this book! In fact, I would encourage you --whether you've read this text a million times or you haven't taken a look at it before-- I would invite you over this week and into next that you spend some time in the book of Ruth as we delve into these stories together.

Speaking of these stories, just this past Monday, we began our new Monday Night Women's Bible Study, studying the book of Ruth. The theme for our study is "Grief, Gratitude, and Grace--an Exploration of the Book of Ruth." This title and the desire to go into this study came about because of the very exact moment we're in, asking the questions of what does it mean to be a people who are able to live our lives with an openness to receive and live in grace? To breathe in deeply, and to--no matter what happens--to live our lives with our hands open in gratitude and thanks for the many gifts that we indeed have received. And while we're doing that, to also be able to name and hold space for the ability to say thanks. For to be able to continue to breathe doesn't mean it's not without its own grief. And likewise, this story in the book of Ruth is a story about women in a time where the both/ands of life: that everything belongs and all the emotions and all of the fears and all of the vulnerabilities are so present for them. So as you re-look at this story I invite you to see it anew and afresh, asking: what are the points of connection and disconnection with our own time and with your life?

So a little bit of context about this story.

The book of Ruth is the only text in our entire canon (meaning the whole of scripture) which is named after not just a woman, but also a woman who isn't an Israelite. She is a foreigner. She is an outsider to the Israelite community AND she is also a part of the most important lineage inside of the Israelite kingdom: namely, the Davidic legacy and this lineage, which indeed then became the lineage that birthed Jesus. So this woman in this book and this story, is a story whose threads come down to us this day. This is a story that impacts and shapes how we move in the world as people who identify ourselves as Christian. But it's also a story that is surprising. It's surprising for many reasons, not least of which because it's a story told and centering around two women. One of them who is older and has been widowed and another woman who is an outsider and a foreigner.

And thus our story begins.

The very first verse notes its location: long ago when Judges governed Israel, a famine swept over the land. Now if you're just reading this or hearing it for the first time, you're like, "Okay, that's nice that there was this long ago time in a kingdom far, far away. This sounds like a very familiar story!" But if you pause for a moment to re-



read this opening clause and delve in more deeply you will note that there is something important about this time long ago when the Judges governed Israel. This is telling us something about the context of what's happening in this text. The time when the Judges governed Israel, what was this time? This was a time in Israel's history where, according to the book of Judges, there was infighting amongst the tribes; these 12 different tribes who were newly in the land that God had promised them (land that was supposed to bring their freedom) and they were trying to figure out how to orient themselves...but there was inter-tribal violence and some of the Judges who ruled them were incredibly unjust and violent. Not only this, but by the time we get to the end of the book of Judges, horrific violence is transpiring, particularly violence against women. For, as the book of Judges notes: "In that time, Israel had no King and everyone did as they saw fit."

Judges is a violent book. It's a time of anarchy. It's a time of a way of being that is opposite and contrary to the ways that God desires God's people to live...and it is in the midst of that moment, at the time when the Judges ruled, that we get the story of Naomi & Ruth. Thus, this story presents a counter-narrative to what was happening in the broader land and history. It's a story of these two women and their family and how God's grace is present...and they choose to live in it.

A few additional details about this text: to start, one that is interesting for us to note is that in the Jewish scriptures, this book sits in a different place than it does in the Christian Canon. In our Bibles you will find the book of Ruth immediately following Judges because it's historically right set in the time of the Judges. However, in the Jewish Canon, Ruth is a part of the third section of their texts known as "The Writings" and within the writings there is a subset of books where there are the Five Scrolls of Megilloth. Sounds like a good WWE wrestling name, right?! "I am Megilloth, here with my five scrolls!" I don't know why I think that's really funny, but I do. Anyway, that's where Ruth sits.

Importantly, these five scrolls shape the liturgical calendar for the Jewish faith. And the book of Ruth is read during the Festival of Weeks (Shavot). The Festival of Weeks takes place during the harvest and it is a time also when the people gather together to remember God's gift of the Torah, which is the Law, and remember the way that God relates to God's people. In the Jewish history and community, Ruth is heralded as an example of it looks like to live as a people who are faithful to the covenant, making clear what it means to be people who embody the law that is intended to enable God's people to be in right relationship with God, with one another, with the land, and with all people. And so this story bears witness to *hesed*, faithfulness to God. That's what this story is about. In the time of anarchy and violence, Ruth is a story about real humans living in faithful relationship with God and one another.

As I noted, this story is named after Ruth, a foreigner Moabite woman. The scene opens in the land of Moab with an Israelite family who is from Bethlehem, which ironically means "basket of bread". Bethlehem is a prosperous place where there should be food enough for everyone. Yet this family has migrated to Moab because



there was a famine in their hometown, so they went to Moab. Now it's kind of strange that they would go to Moab because it's basically like if you went from Stillwater to Hudson, you cross a river, but it's basically the same place in every other way...yet they go to Moab. By naming that they went to Moab this may have been an important signal to the original hearers who may have well asked: "Why would they go there? The Moabites? Do they know who the Moabites are?" Their going to Moab would be worse than say for me as a kid born in the eighties and knowing that the USSR was our decided enemy and we were going to beat them in the Olympics, to discover that you had been cheering for the USSR. You just wouldn't do that. They are the evil empire! This conflict was even more fierce. And we see this throughout the witness of the Jewish scriptures, that generally speaking, the Moabites, even though they're close familial relationship with the Israelites, they are seen as suspect. They're seen as dangerous and especially the women, for if you intermarry with them, you'll abandon YHWH God. And Oh, by the way, if you are a Moabite or have Moabite ancestry for 10 generations, you can't worship in the temple.

So spoiler alert: Ruth the Moabite (as the text says again and again in case you forget), she's a Moabite in case you forgot, well- she's still a Moabite. Anyway...spoiler alert, Ruth begets Obed and Obed begets Jesse, and Jesse begets David. Okay. So I'm not really great at math, but I'm pretty sure that is only about three generations. The leader of all of Israel- the one after God's own heart, David, is a Moabite and should be forbidden from worship! But one of the things about the Jewish Canon related to these writings and scrolls is that what it represents and reminds us of is that within the tradition of Judaism there has always been a pluralistic way of understanding what it means to be the people of God. And so, one of the thoughts about when this text was written is it may have been written as a or a counter-witness to the xenophobic texts written against the Moabites, and in-particular Ezra-Nehemiah, which emphatically states that you cannot marry outsiders. Thus, some scholars think that Ruth may be a counterpoint to that witness. Alternatively, other scholars think that Ruth is seeking to argue in favor of the Davidic legacy by naming one with Moabite heritage as the embodiment of *hesed* loyalty.

Either way, whenever it was written, edited, and compiled, we know for sure that this story is present in our canon and that it's utilized both in the history of Jewish worship and in rabbinical understanding to tell the story of what it actually means to be *hesed*, faithful.

So what do I love about this? Well, the first thing that I love about it is that the example of faithfulness and what it means to be people who truly are living in that covenantal committed relationship with God is two women, women who tell us the story about how God relates to God's people and then how we are supposed to relate to one another. Another thing I love about this book is that it's a really human story. It's a representation of those stories that so often transpire in the midst of history where we normatively tell about conquest and kingdoms (i.e.- Judges), this is one of those stories of that centers around the lived and embodied stories of people who



gather in kitchens and at the dining room table and have family relationships. Indeed, in the midst of Judges and political violence, we get to hear a human story about women who survived. And guess what- THAT'S how God shows up and that's a place from which we can learn about how God moves in *hesed* relationship with us.

Just like Jesus sat down over table fellowship with sinners and tax collectors and his disciples, these women are gathered in the intimacy of their relationships, reminding us that God doesn't just show up in big political pronouncements, but God shows up in the real of our simple, beautiful, complex lives. Isn't that cool? It's a reminder to us that in whatever we're doing each day there was and is a call and an invitation to be people who in this moment, in the time of global pandemic, people who live and bear witness to this faithful, good God who asks us to live with open generosity and faithful love of our neighbors.

Another thing that I love about this text is that it challenges the people of Israel and by extension us, its current readers, to rethink the boundaries around who gets to tell us where God belongs and where God speaks from and who indeed speaks of the truth of how God works in the world. Because indeed, God's faithfulness is shown through a Moabite woman and through her mother-in-law and to have a story about a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law representing God, well, I think that's a pretty good thing.

So let's take a little bit of a deeper look at this text. As we enter into the story, we encounter the woman who- though the book is not named for her- really is the central character in many ways, Naomi. Naomi, we are told, has moved to this new land, has sojourned as so many of her own ancestors had done and migrated due to the constraints and the realities of poverty and lack of food, and she finds herself as a foreigner in a new land.

Her sons take women from Moab (echoing what has happened in the book of Judges), and there is a type of violence, and yet even in the midst of this violence, these women, when their husbands die, leaving them with no children after 10 years, (which wouldn't have been a good thing for anybody) they choose one another. All the men are gone and now suddenly two Moabite woman and a Jewish woman, look at each other saying, "What do we do now?" And many of you know this, but contextually at this time to be a woman whose husband and sons had died and you're in another land, well, you are left with nothing. It's not like you can go get a job. It's not like you have some inheritance or there's a social welfare system that's going to take care of you. They were in dire circumstances, constrained in so many ways.

And what I love about this story is that the way that it represents how grace actually shows up. Grace doesn't have to look like, "Oh, I trust and I know all of it will be okay," for grace is much more vulnerable and liminal than that. Instead, grace is that which enables us to put one step in front of the other as little bit by little bit we continue to move forward. And in this moment, in the midst of this grief, in the midst of this vulnerability, Naomi makes a decision. A decision of courage, a decision to go back to



her people and see what might happen. In this text she, like Job, calls out to God and says, "God (Shaddai- the mighty one), this isn't just! Here I am: you've left me with nothing. My daughters-in-law are barren. My sons have died. My husband has died too. I have nothing. And now God almighty, where are you? Why have you not shown up?"

And also like Job, she calls out and cries to God, calling God to account. And in this way she is critiquing the system that has left her with nothing and asking for God to save her in the midst of the injustice.

This is a story about how grace shows up, that this woman is able to name the actuality of her experience, both in her pronunciation to God, "God, where are you?" but also in her naming of herself honestly. As she comes back to her community, she tells them, "Don't call me by Naomi anymore call me Mara." Names matter in the Jewish community and for her to name herself not as "Joy," which Naomi means, but to name herself as one who is bitter is to acknowledge that her circumstances in which she finds herself have constrained her to such a point that she's like, "My name isn't even recognizable to me anymore," and yet in the midst of this moment she still continues onward.

Naomi names with honestly what she's holding and struggling to encounter and live with. She names this...and yet she still persists. And while we don't know all of what she's feeling or all of what she's experiencing, it very well might be that she's trying to get her daughters-in-law to leave her alone because she doesn't really want to go home with two Moabite foreigners like, "Hey, it's me, Naomi, will you take me in along with these other two women who just happened to be from like a tribe we hate and everything." That might be why she tells them not to come with her. It might be that she is aware that she has nothing for them. That indeed, as is written here in the text, she says, "What do you think? I can have more sons who then will take care of you?" As would have been a custom and possibility at the time.

It is impossible for her. And so she tells them, "Listen, you've been faithful in the way that God is faithful to God's people (*hesed*). Go back to your family and be free and blessed." And so, one of her daughters-in-law does indeed go... and there's no judgment of her in the text. She goes back to her people, but her other daughter-in-law says, "No, I'm coming with you anyway." And she aligns herself with her mother-in-law and exclaims, "Now you are my people. Your kin are my kin. Your God is my God." And Naomi doesn't say anything in response. We don't know why she doesn't say anything. Maybe she was like, "All right, fine, you, when I'm done arguing, I've already lost everything. I'm not going to argue with some Moabite woman. Just fine, come with me. Just leave me alone."

Or maybe something else is going on.

Maybe she's been persuaded and convinced. Maybe there's a glimmering of hope in her that maybe grace hasn't left her: maybe she's not abandoned, but she doesn't



want to go there yet because she's afraid. We don't know exactly why or what is happening, yet throughout the next chapters, the story evidences grace: the grace that enables us to be bold, not because we know the end of the story, but because little bit by little bit we're able to take one step and then another. And Naomi is an embodiment of this kind of boldness, a boldness that that keeps breathing. A boldness that chooses to love her daughter-in-law even though her daughter-in-law is from a people who are hated her people. A boldness of a woman who connives and schemes with the resources she has and calls God to account and who lives out that sort of faithfulness and, in so doing, reminds her community, and us through them, that we belong to one another.

Naomi lives this boldness by existing and persisting and resisting the things around her that are constraining her. She bears witness to a grace that holds space for us to be human too. A grace that reminds us that in these times to be bold doesn't mean that we are individually going to come up with a cure for Coronavirus. To be bold doesn't mean that we are going to find all of the ways to heal all of the ills of the world. ***But to be bold is to choose love.*** To be bold is to refuse the witness of the book of Judges, where we all just do whatever we think is right. No, instead it's a boldness that seeks to live more deeply in alignment with God's vision of community and faithfulness. It's a boldness that seeks to live out God's vision of kingdom and God's vision of how grace actually saves us.

So how about you?

What's the story in your own life and the realities where maybe, like Naomi, you find yourself feeling some barrenness? Asking: does God still care? You've wondered if God's way of wanting us to align ourselves as humans and as Christian community doesn't look like the things you think it ought to look like. If you've had any of the questions, feelings, or experiences: Welcome to being human with the rest of us.

My friends, might we turn to the story of Naomi, a story about a woman who kept going. A woman whose boldness looked like that kind of persistence. Whose boldness looked like that kind of faithfulness. Whose boldness looked like that kind of trust. Whose boldness makes clear to us that "Grace, Actually Makes us Bold."

Grace makes us bold to be the people of God, to bear witness to a God whose faithfulness crosses all generations and all divisions. It makes us bold to ask for what we need. To turn to one another, to refuse the exclusions and to remember that grace will actually be present with us. In this story, God's grace shows up through real people and God's grace continues to show up through real people even until this day.

So how is God asking and inviting you and me and us collectively to be the church by bearing witness to the grace, the grace that actually makes us bold?

Bold enough to keep believing and living our lives in *hesed* faithfulness to the God who is and was and is to come. Bold enough to love and have concern for our



neighbors so that the story we might tell each other might be, like Ruth, one of some real people (with names remembered by history or not) who chose to be the people of God in a time of pandemic.

May it be so, and may grace, indeed, make us bold.

Amen.



Grace Actually Restores

Ruth 2:8-13, 17-23

⁸ Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Now listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my young women. ⁹ Keep your eyes on the field that is being reaped, and follow behind them. I have ordered the young men not to bother you. If you get thirsty, go to the vessels and drink from what the young men have drawn." ¹⁰ Then she fell prostrate, with her face to the ground, and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?" ¹¹ But Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. ¹² May the Lord reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!" ¹³ Then she said, "May I continue to find favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant, even though I am not one of your servants."

¹⁷ So she gleaned in the field until evening. Then she beat out what she had gleaned, and it was about an ephah of barley. ¹⁸ She picked it up and came into the town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gleaned. Then she took out and gave her what was left over after she herself had been satisfied. ¹⁹ Her mother-in-law said to her, "Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you." So she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, "The name of the man with whom I worked today is Boaz." ²⁰ Then Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!" Naomi also said to her, "The man is a relative of ours, one of our nearest kin." ²¹ Then Ruth the Moabite said, "He even said to me, 'Stay close by my servants, until they have finished all my harvest.'" ²² Naomi said to Ruth, her daughter-in-law, "It is better, my daughter, that you go out with his young women, otherwise you might be bothered in another field." ²³ So she stayed close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests; and she lived with her mother-in-law.

- Ruth 2:8-13, 17-23 (NRSV)

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Good morning! It's so wonderful to be back with you in worship again this morning. My name's Sara, and I am one of the ministers here at Colonial Church. To those of you who mother or are mothers of one form or another: we wish you a special day this day. May you know that you are held and loved.

And for those for whom this day is a little more complicated, we also hope that you feel very loved and seen by the God who has created all of us and who, indeed, like a mother, cares for us all. So, as we join in continued worship, let us pray together.

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God, on this day where we celebrate and honor those who give birth, those who adopt, those who choose to show up in the world to be people of life, may we indeed incline our whole hearts and lives to you the God who bears us, the God who midwives us into freedom, the God whose Spirit is ever groaning like in the pains of childbirth. That your kingdom and your way of life and of love may indeed come here on earth as it is in heaven. So today God, we rejoice with those who rejoice, and we mourn with those who mourn. And in all things, we trust ourselves to you, the God who is our mother, our father, and our source of all life, for it's in your name that we gather and pray, AMEN.

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On Thursday morning of this week, I had the opportunity to be able to spend some time with the Thursday Morning Fellowship ladies. During the course of sharing prayer requests and conversing about the beauty and the pain that was dear to each of our hearts, Pat Peterson (our most recent moderator) brought us into a conversation about questions of purpose.

Pat invited us to consider: What does it mean to be a people who, in the midst of pandemic, show up in the world, not as human doings, but as human beings—asking God those deeper questions about who we are called to be in this time. She shared a brief poem from one of my favorite poets, Mary Oliver, and I wanted to share it with you today. It's from a larger poem called "Sometimes" but gives instructions for living a life:

4.
Instructions for living a life:
Pay attention.
Be astonished.
*Tell about it.*¹

Pay attention, be astonished, tell about it.

¹ Mary Oliver, "Sometimes," *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017), 104-106.



On this day, in the midst of a global pandemic, we all have stories to tell, moments of grace that have intersected our lives...if only we will pay attention and allow ourselves to be astonished.

But sometimes we forget to tell those stories. Sometimes the world gets so chaotic and feels so overwhelming that we lose sight of those moments of peace and beauty; we forget that some of the most powerful moments and memories we carry with us... moments like going for a walk when you were a little girl with your grandma, like I did. Those moments where you get to have FaceTime conversation with your grandkids over story time even though we're in the midst of a pandemic. These are the stories of life and of beauty...if only we will pay attention and be astonished, then we can tell each other about it.

And one of the things that I love about the text that we get to spend some time with today is that it is the story of two women in the everyday rhythm of their lives and details how God shows up there. They lived their lives in the midst of a world filled with chaos, deep violence, pain, and suffering. And if you listened last week or if you've read your Bible before then you know that the book of Ruth is set during the time of the Judges. It was a time of intertribal fighting, with different groups grabbing and vying for power. And in the midst of that time, we are brought to this story about real people seeking to live a life. So today let's take a little bit deeper look into their story to discover more of how "Grace Actually Restores."

A little bit of context and a quick refresher for us (if you want deeper context, go listen to last week's sermon). The book of Ruth follows the book of Judges in the Christian Canon. As it says at the start of Ruth, chapter one: "During the time of the judges..." In the Jewish Canon however, the book of Ruth is part of a section of "Writings" and is utilized as a part of the liturgical worship calendar during the harvest festival known as Shavuot, The Festival of Weeks. Within this context then, the story of Naomi and Ruth is told.²

One of the things I love about this story is that if you think about the different cultural stories we tell like, "The Little Boy Who Cried Wolf," is that cultural stories often have a moral, an imperative about how you're supposed to show up in the world. And Ruth likewise functions as a cultural tale to remind the Jewish people of what it means to be faithful people to God (*hesed*)³. It reminds them that during the harvest, they're not supposed to forget the widow, the outsider, or the foreigner in their midst. The story of Ruth thus reflects to the people who God is calling and inviting them to be through the story of these women who persist in being faithful in the midst of political chaos violence.

² To learn more about the festival see, for instance: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shavuot>.

³ Another way of understanding hesed is that of loving-kindness. It is charity, it is faithful living. It is the core ethical value for the community. See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chesed>.



As we move into the story depicted in these four chapters, we can note how it begins with loss and barrenness, the negotiation of kinship ties, and Naomi's deep lament that I talked about last week. As we get to the very end of the text however, the whole story gets reversed. It moves from loss and barrenness to a story of how grace restores, where kinship gets renegotiated, where there's celebration, and there is new life, new growth, and a new story that is birthed.

As we turn to chapter two today, we are moved more deeply into the story of what is unfolding between these two women, who were in a constrained and challenging place. Ruth decides to go ahead and try to make a way for herself and for her mother-in-law. So she heads out to the fields, because one of the practices that they had at the time was when you would go through and do the equivalent of whatever farmers did at that time to plow their fields (disclaimer: I'm not a farmer), they would then leave behind the edges of what they were harvesting from, so that the poor could come along and then gather up food so that they could survive.

When the story of Ruth gets told during the Festival of Weeks for the Jewish community, as is outlined in Deuteronomy and Exodus, we read about how indeed the Lord, God commands the people that they're supposed to leave a portion of the harvest for the poor because God takes care of them and they are likewise called to be people who take care of everyone, particularly those the most at the margins.⁴

As we move more deeply into chapter two, Ruth has shown up to glean from the harvest and she ends up at a field of a man named Boaz. Names matter a lot in the Jewish community. And his name means "one of strength or valor." We know that he's well-to-do, he has access to resources, which is in stark contrast with the reality our protagonists are facing. And Ruth goes to his land, and as Boaz appears on the scene, he pronounces a blessing on all the workers and the people, and he notices this woman who's out of place. It's like you think of a small town: if you're in a small town and there's a new person in town, well everybody knows about it, right? The same is true even here at church, right? If you've been sitting in the same pew for 25 or 45 years, and suddenly you come to church and someone is sitting in *your* seat, you notice, right? And so, Boaz pays attention. He sees this new person and he asks, "Who is this?"

As I noted last week, one of the things I love about this text is how often it says that Ruth is a Moabite. If you haven't figured out that she's a Moabite by chapter one, the editors will tell you about 20 more times by the time you get to chapter two. The important thing about her being a Moabite is these were the hated outsiders. These were folks who were thought to defile the Jewish people and their women were particularly dangerous. And yet here's this woman, this *Moabite* who (oh by the way, she's a Moabite, did you know that?) well, she's new and she's sitting in my seat in the pew, what is she doing here? So she tells her story to Boaz, sharing with him what she's doing and that she is there to gather food.

⁴ Deuteronomy 16:9-12 and Exodus 34:22-24. In Numbers 28:26-31 it is named the Day of the Firstfruits.



As Boaz comes on the scene and there's so many different ways he could respond to this woman, Moabite outsider. The tension rises for us as readers: what will he do? One of the things I love about what happens with Boaz is if you contrast his character with the men in the book of Judges, you get a beautiful example of what it means to be a man who is participating in God's kingdom, for instead of the profound gender-based sexual violence that we read about at the end of the book of Judges, here in Ruth, Boaz employs his power for good in order to ensure that Ruth is unmolested. The text depicts him knowing that given her identities that he knew she was under threat for becoming a victim of sexual violence, because she was a Moabite outsider woman. And he says to his male workers: "Do not molest her." In fact, he goes beyond mere pronouncement. He evidences the way that God's faithfulness shows up, embodying what it means to be one of God's *hesed*. To follow the law is not just at the bare minimum, but to supersede it with the law of love: the law that is in solidarity with the most vulnerable in our midst and so he sits down with this woman Moabite outsider and by doing so basically communicates to everyone, "She matters here, you cannot harm her in any way."

So indeed, Ruth continues to go through the field and pick up grain and she goes home and Naomi's like, "What is this? And how did you get all this food?" Well, Ruth tells Naomi what happened and how she got the food, and Naomi's like, "Oh my goodness. I just had a realization: Boaz is a possible kinsman redeemer for us!" Now, what's a kinsman redeemer? Well, this is something in the Jewish community that would have been well known to them at the time because land functioned so integrally for people being able to eat. Thus, it mattered a lot if a man died an untimely death, because his family wouldn't have a social safety net to catch them other than their land. It was thus up to the community to ensure that the people who were most vulnerable would be taken care of. Having a kinsman redeemer was a way for a woman who had experienced the death of their male spouse, to be able to be cared for. And Naomi and Ruth realize: "Oh my goodness, Boaz could indeed be that person. We might not actually starve to death and might have a viable future!"

Now, there's way more to this story that we weren't able to read today because I didn't think you wanted to be here for a two-hour long worship service with me preaching through all of the book of Ruth verse by verse, so I'll summarize.

Essentially, what happens through the next two chapters is that we find out that Boaz, even though he was very kind and in many ways was in God-honoring solidarity with Ruth by ensuring her safety, in being generous to her, and letting her take grain from the harvest, he doesn't actually identify himself as a kinsman redeemer. So one of the powerful things that happens as we move into chapter three and four is that the women take charge. They utilize the resources and the capacities that they have in order to ensure that they can live. They also called Boaz to account; they remind him of what God is calling him to do in being a kinsman redeemer.

Part of what I love about this story, particularly on Mother's Day, is that throughout history, women have done what they could do to care for their families: to love, to



invite, and to challenge people who have access to power to live in deeper faithfulness to the way that God desires us to live. And Ruth and Naomi, they indeed do this work, and Boaz awakens to it and says, "All right, fine, you win. I'll do the thing that I need to do and live in faithful response to who God is calling me." And as we arrive at the end of the story then, it literally flips on its head from the opening in chapter one where there was barrenness and loss, deep grief, and vulnerability. It now becomes a story of new life, new possibility, and new ways of being in the world. It's a story about how "Grace Actually Restores."

One of the things I also love about this text is that I love the name, Ruth. As I said before, names matter a lot in the Jewish scriptures, and they remind us what we ought to be paying attention to. The name Ruth can be translated as "beloved." Fundamentally, she is the character in the story who represents and best reflects God's faithfulness to us and the way that God shows up in our lives, reminding us and inviting us to be a people who we are called to be. And in this way, we're told at the very end of this text that Ruth, by her action (and then Boaz's reaction and response to that), becomes the embodiment of God's faithfulness. She lives as a person of God in faithful response, and Boaz then also lives in faithful response to those who are most marginalized. As Boaz responds and Ruth responds, we see that what happens is that the child that is born them is not identified as their child, it's identified as Naomi's grandchild. And the power and the beauty of this is that it's a story which evidences the grace that restores Naomi to community. This birth reintegrates her into her community as a woman who had lost everything—where suddenly now she has standing again in her community—she has a future and a hope that is assured.

This is what it means to be a people who live as the beloved: it's to be a people, who live our lives in faithful response (*hesed*) so as to notice those who are outside of the bounds of who we think are going to be able to be cared for in our communities, and to make possible the way for them to come back home and be restored to their rightful dignity in society.

An additional thing I love about this book is at the very end of the text, we're told some of the lineage that flows from Ruth—this Moabite woman. This Moabite woman is indeed the great, great-grandma of King David. And we, as people who identify ourselves as ones who follow Jesus, know that David is indeed the patriarch and part of the lineage of Jesus, right? And who is Jesus, if not God's beloved son, right? This is said of him during his baptism: "This is my beloved son in whom I am well-pleased."⁵

Ruth, the beloved outsider (woman, Moabite), is the ancestor of Jesus who is the fullness of the embodiment of God's love here on earth (the beloved), and Jesus comes to earth as love embodied with an invitation to each of us to be restored and reintegrated into God's community. Jesus comes to bring us back to table fellowship with the God who desires this restoration to our rightful place in the family of

⁵ Matthew 3:17.



God...oh, I just love this! Like, Ruth gets to be the first example, an embodiment who by her faithfulness, lives as the beloved. And her faithfulness gives birth and makes possible the fullness of God's embodied belovedness in Jesus! And, in turn, we are invited to become people who live, "Welcome, Beloved," right?

And part of what I love about this story, is that it's not the story or the lineage coming out of the book of Judges that we remember. It's not the story of the princes and the heroes in the ways that we often write history books. No, the story that makes clear who God is and how God shows up in the world, the story of the *hesed*, is found in the story about some faithful women, who trusted God, who shook their fists at injustice, and who employed the resources they had in order to build a future...together.

So to those of you who have made our lives and our futures possible: we give you thanks. For you who have mothered, who have led, who are doctors, and nurses, and teachers, to you who have faithfully sought to care for and see the belovedness in those who surround you, we give such great thanks this Mother's Day.

I was reading recently the story from Janet Hagberg, about some work that she had been doing and reflecting upon about power. Power and the analysis of it has been a big part of her work and leadership throughout life. And she asked us to consider what does power look like in the time of pandemic? Which echoes for me, the question that Pat brought up on Thursday, what does it mean to be people who live with purpose?

Janet writes that the stages of power in a time of pandemic are:

- Stage 1: Powerlessness- We often we start first by asking, "How will I survive?"
- Stage 2: Power by Association- In stage two we ask: "How will I help myself and my neighbor?"
- Stage 3: Power by Achievement- Then as we dig a little bit deeper, we begin to ask: "How we can achieve something that makes a difference?" and "How will I lead with competence and courage?"
- Stage 4: Power by Reflection- And then if we allow ourselves to go a little bit deeper into that vulnerability, we can begin to ask: "What are the deeper questions I need to be asking?" Questions such as: "How do I exercise true leadership in a remarkable time like this?"
- The Wall- And if we go even deeper and deeper, we will encounter the wall where we ask, "How do I actually mend myself and the world around me?"
- Stage 5: Power by Purpose- Here we live from a place of inner peace and plenty where we can ask: "How do I live from my soul and view my life differently, in solidarity with others?"



- Stage 6: Power by Wisdom- Here we ask: “How and where is my presence most needed?” And this frames how we live out our being in the world.⁶

The living of these questions in the face of the time of Judges is the story of Ruth: a story about women who go deeper in, who ask the questions about who God is inviting them to do and to be, and they show up in the world with their presence to bring healing and restoration.

So I wonder for us, instead of being like the people in Judges, who grasp onto power or live from the places of our fear, what happens as we continue to root in a little bit deeper? What happens when we look at the people around us, to find the joy in the little children, and a really cute dogs named Blue (that’s my dog), to remember that the power of how God shows up in pandemic is through faithful people like you and me who live into being beloved, and in so doing, are then able to be the people who help to restore others to their position in the community.

Let’s be a people who bear witness to that way of being; let’s be a people who join with this God in birthing all of creation anew. And then as Mary Oliver challenges, and reminds us, let us be a people who followed the good instructions on living a life:

Let’s pay attention.

Let’s be astonished.

And let’s tell each other and the world about it.

Let’s look for those stories where “Grace Actually Restores,” and then let’s tell each other about them.

May you tell the people in your lives today, especially those faithful women, of your thanks and gratitude for what they’ve done in your life. We give thanks for this life and for the grace which restores us to love.

Amen.

⁶ Janet O. Hagberg, “Real Power in the Wake of COVID-19,” Accessed online: http://www.janethagberg.com/uploads/3/9/3/4/39346357/real_power_in_the_wake_of_covid_3.pdf (April 2020).



Freedom: The Kingdom of Jubilee

Leviticus 25:8-17

You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud on the 10th day of the seventh month, on the day of atonement. You shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land and you shall hallow the 15th year, and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a Jubilee for you. You shall return, every one of you, to your property, and every one of you to your family. That 15th year shall be a Jubilee for you.

You shall not sow or reap the after-growth or harvest the unpruned vines for it's a Jubilee. It shall be holy to you. You shall eat only what the field itself produces. In this year of Jubilee, you shall return every one of you to your property. When you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not cheat one another. When you buy from your neighbor, you shall pay only for the number of years since the Jubilee. The seller shall charge you only for the remaining crop years. If the years are more, you shall increase the price, and if the years are fewer, you shall diminish the price for it is a certain number of harvests that are being sold to you. You shall not cheat one another but you shall fear your God, for I am the Lord, your God.

- Leviticus 25:8-17 (NRSV)

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As we continue in worship and turn to a time of sitting with and considering the passage that we just heard, would you join me in prayer?

God, on this weekend as we, as a nation, celebrate the invitation and cry of freedom, might we be a people who align ourselves and our lives more deeply with your kingdom, with your vision, and your work of jubilee and freedom for all.

For it's in Christ's name that we gather and we pray, and it's in your power that we move and work for freedom.

Amen.

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As many of you know, we are in the midst of a sermon series in which we are considering what it means to be a Kingdom People: A people who, in the midst of a world that is rife with political division and strife, root in and identity ourselves not



according to our affiliations of Republican or Democrat, or Minnesotan or Wisconsinite, but as people who are fundamentally oriented and grounded in the Kingdom of God. For to be a Kingdom People means that we seek to be a people who together, in affirmation that Jesus is Lord, repudiate any cries which would invite us to name any other human as Lord.

And over these next two weeks we're going to embark upon a deeper exploration of an aspect of God's kingdom — because if we're going to be a kingdom people we need to know what kingdom we're a part of, right? — and when we pray, thy kingdom come we need to know; What is the content of that kingdom?

So this week and next, we're considering an aspect of the kingdom of God that is woven throughout Scripture but we don't often talk about: Jubilee. Today, I'm going to outline a bit of the historical context of this cry for freedom and for jubilee as it appears in the narration of the life of God's people, the Jewish people. And next week Tony Jones, who has been our Confirmation Pastor for the last year and a half, will be preaching about Jesus' inaugural sermon, in a message he has titled "Jesus for President." So stay tuned both this week and next week as we explore this aspect of what it means to be kingdom people together.

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In 2015, a film starring Tom Hanks was released entitled *Bridge of Spies*. It tells the story of a lawyer, played by Hanks, who was called to defend a man who'd been accused of treason against the United States during the Cold War. Many people pressured the lawyer to only perform a perfunctory defense of the man, and when Tom Hanks' character stuck to his principle that all people are deserving of a right to a fair trial and the presumption of innocence in the United States, people threatened his family for doing so. Grounded in principle, committed to our constitution and the ideals to which we ascribe as citizens, he believed it was his job to ensure that everyone had a right to a fair trial in the United States. Though he and his family received death threats for his work, he persisted because he believed in the dream and the possibility of what America is and should be.¹

And on this weekend, when we have celebrated and looked for and longed for the promises of what our nation has oriented ourselves to: freedom, life, and liberty for all, we are also this day invited to also consider that this promise is something that we never fully grasp. It exists in part as a critique and as a reminder to us to continue to be and become people of the promise. Life isn't ours in a way where we can clutch it tightly, and justice is a working out that continues throughout our journey as individuals, communities, a nation, a people, and in so many ways, no less has this also been forever true of God's people.

Going back to the passage that we heard in Leviticus, it details the ways in which God's people were to orient themselves to be faithful as they lived in the land. The cry and

¹ Steven Spielberg, *Bridge of Spies* (Hollywood: Dreamworks, 2015)



the call of Leviticus 25 is one that invites the people to remember that the land in which they are inhabiting is fundamentally YHWH's. They've not done anything to deserve this life. To be called out as God's people wasn't because of their merit, it just simply was...because of who God was and who God was inviting them to be.

This text begins with the remembrance that this land itself is God's land. It's not something for us to use and abuse. It's something for us to remember, something that we are to live with in rhythmic truth: That rest is part of what it means to honor the God who gives us graciously all things. You may remember, even going back to the stories of the creation of the world, there is rest involved. The goodness of the earth is already present when humans are formed. It wasn't through striving or any work of their own, it was because of who YHWH this God is and was, that then the people can flourish and eat and drink the goodness of promise. And so in Leviticus, we're reminded, "Hey, people, the land is God's. Live in a rhythm of that honors that, but not just with the land....in all ways live in rhythm with who YHWH is."

The cry in Leviticus 25 is for us to remember: to remember that as we move into the land, that the promises of freedom from slavery which God had saved the Israelites after 400 years of captivity in Egypt, that promise isn't ever something that is fully realized but it is a constant need to reorient ourselves to the call of YHWH, to be a people who live freedom in relationship with one another. That is why Jubilee exists, because humans are going to human. And sometimes us humans, even with our best intentions, we forget what it is to live the promises that God has invited us to.

And so every 50 years, the people are called to live in such a way so as to make possible the breathing space and the renewal of the people so that everyone can actually live free. For those who, because of circumstances in their life, for one reason or another, have forfeited their property and their inheritance, it is returned to them. For as a people to whom land mattered a lot to their wellbeing and survival in the world getting back their land changed everything. No matter the reason they had forfeited their land, Jubilee is the reset that, boom, elevates them to their right position again in society. Jubilee makes possible freedom.

And for those of us who over time in this land would have taken on as payment the land of another, we are then called to give back to them so that indeed the people of Israel could be a people who walked together as persons equally formed in God's image, as one's called to live in this land as a people of freedom. A people have this sort of promise. And so today, as we have celebrated and honored the movement of freedom in our world and particularly in our country, we're reminded that to be a kingdom people, to be a people of Jubilee and make freedom ring.

Jubilee reminds us that freedom isn't something we capture at once, but it is a promise that we live. It is a prayer that we answer by walking out faithfulness. Jubilee is the embodiment of that which we pray each week: God, that your kingdom would come and your will be done here on earth. Freedom isn't ours, even though it is, it's not fully. And so we continue to move in rhythm and dance with the God of all freedom who



hears the cry of God's people, whether that was from thousands of years ago or whether it is from today. And whether that cry for freedom is one in your heart because of pain and trauma you have known, whether it is because of the reality of systemic injustice, these are all similar echoes and cries to one God, the Lord and God of all of us: cries for freedom and jubilee.

That's why I love hearing this passage: At the beginning of the year of Jubilee, the shofar was to blow. This is the same shofar which blows on the Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. In fact, it's sound signals and invites us to see that individual liberation, that the atonement for our sins as individuals and as a community is fundamentally tied to the collective political and economic liberation for all of us.

One of my favorite ethicists, Reinhold Niebuhr lived and wrote in the early to mid-20th century. In the wake of World War I and the modernist fundamentalist split inside of Christianity in which people were trying to discern how science and modern understandings of the world intersected with Christian faith, he wrote a book called *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*. In it he argued for a vision of a prophetic religion rooted in Jesus and the gospel and the ethic of love.²

He was speaking to a world in which, on the one hand, too often more conservative Christians were focused solely on the dimension of justice and of love between the self and God. We might say in Leviticus terminology, they focused on Yom Kippur and the shofar blow for individual freedom. Indeed, Reinhold argues that this individual and God relationship is part of the call and the cry of the good news of Christ, but that's not all that the call is about. He likewise critiques the more liberal Christians of his time who were focused on the dimension between us and human only justice and the sentimentality of liberal ideals that believed that humans are only good, which he believe also missed that the shofar blow isn't just about jubilee in the economic or political sense.

And even while so beautifully, there is the Jubilee cry of shofar justice, we need to bring together these dimensions of the individual and the communal, the political and the spiritual for the Spirit transforms both individual hearts, but Jesus and the gospel is also fundamentally concerned with livability and justice for all of God's people and for this earth...and that these don't need to be in conflict.

And part of why we're doing this summer series on being a "Kingdom People," is because 98% of our lives are influenced by the new sources we watch, by the pop songs we listened to, and by our political party. But as a church, as people who follow Jesus we want to be a people who are first rooted and grounded in what it means to be a kingdom people. We want to FIRST be a people whose cry for freedom is rooted in the God who has worked freedom for God's people throughout all time in history, freedom in every sense. For to encounter God is to have both our individual and our

² Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, original edition 1935 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013).



corporate and our collective and our societal life changed. So that indeed, as kingdom people, we get to bear witness to a coming kingdom that is already here and in our midst.

This is why we say and we cry freedom, for **this is** the kingdom cry of Jubilee!

We long for freedom, for jubilee, so that we might live rightly in this land and in the whole world together.

Strangely, sometimes when I hear people talk about freedom, as a person who is a doctoral candidate in ethics, I often have a few thoughts about it. Namely, the ways in which sometimes we talk about freedom as if it had no encumbrance at all. Even our mask debate is often rooted in an ideal of “Don’t tread on me! I should be free to do whatever I want.”

This stupefies me because this is not how freedom works in general, let alone for us as Christians. Freedom is always and fundamentally constrained and shaped by boundaries. For if I just do whatever I want all of the time, can I harm you? Am I free to hurt my neighbors, to ignore the needs of others? No. Does freedom give me permission to kill you if I want to? I sure hope not.

To think that freedom means I can just do whatever I want and I bear no obligation to another is both philosophically and biblically wrong. That is not what freedom is about.

That’s why I thought I’d go old school on this 4th of July weekend, and bring us back to one of the original purveyors and fighters for freedom inside of Christianity, Martin Luther. Back in 1520, Martin Luther wrote a piece on the “Freedom of the Christian.” He argues that on account of the freedom that we know because of Christ, we are then made free to be fundamentally constrained and obliged to love our neighbors. He writes:

We conclude, therefore, that a Christian lives not to himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise, he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith, he is caught up beyond himself into God. And by love, he descends beneath himself into his neighbor.³

Martin Luther also wrote that “A Christian is perfectly free and subject to none,” because we know the freedom that God gives us in our inner beings, free to be, free to live, free to be relieved from the ways that ego and self-preservation seek to tell us that freedom is fundamentally selfishness to do whatever I want. But he then also says “A Christian is also a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”⁴ For the freedom that we have and the freedom which we seek and the freedom of which we dream is something that invites us to live out of the places of love and freedom so that we might then work out that freedom with fear and trembling as we work to make freedom

³ Martin Luther, “Freedom of the Christian,” *Martin Luther: Selections From His Writings*, John Dillenberger, ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1962), 80.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.



possible in every dimension for everyone and live as servants and neighbors who love all.

Today as we celebrate, today as we remember, today might we also dream, might we also gird ourselves up so that we can be a people who, as Paul reminds us, press on to take hold of that for which Christ has taken hold of us, and Christ has taken hold of us for freedom.⁵

A freedom in which the bells ring, the trumpets blast, and the good news is proclaimed: That it is for freedom that we have been set free!

Freedom for ourselves.

Freedom for all of us.

So let's live in this land as a people who are committed to Jubilee, that those who've been brought low might be raised up, and that the world might exist in view of a kingdom vision of the God who is the creator and sustainer and bringer of freedom for all of us.

Indeed, may freedom ring.⁶

Amen.

⁵ Philippians 3:12-14.

⁶ Referencing Martin Luther King, "I Have a Dream," "I Have a Dream," Address Delivered at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (August 28, 1963). Access online: <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/i-have-dream-address-delivered-march-washington-jobs-and-freedom>.



The Kin-dom Of God

John 15:12-17

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this until they down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer because a servant does not know what the master is doing, but I call you friends because I have made known to you everything that I've heard from my Father. You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I pledge you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last. So the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name, and giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

- John 15:12-17

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Well, hello again! Today we are continuing our sermon series as we're exploring what it means for us to be a "Kingdom People." In a world and time where there's so many competing ideologies that are inviting and asking us to show up in the world in particular ways, we, as a people who name ourselves as persons of faith, want to be those who open ourselves, our hands, and our lives, to be transformed more deeply and truly into the image of Christ.

So today, we will continue the exploration of what it means for us to be a kingdom people by exploring a concept and an aspect of the kingdom of God and a way of speaking about it, that may be new to some of you. This is the idea that the kingdom of God is actually a kin-dom, a kin-dom for all of us. So as we move forward in this time of exploring the text from John and the ways of our faith, will you pray with me?

Loving God, we give you thanks for the gift of life, for the ways in which you breathe on us and in our midst, and the ways that you meet us in the places of our individual, our corporate, and our global needs. God, as you have reminded us: you call us friends. So might we be a people, a kin-dom people who live our lives in alignment with your vision, that your will would indeed be done here on earth as it is in heaven.

Amen.

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As I noted, over the past weeks we've been talking about the kingdom of God and what it means to be a Kingdom People. And you know what? I think it would be a



remiss on my part if we didn't pause in the middle of this sermon series for me to ask you: "Okay, so how would you define the kingdom of God?"

This summer we've been talking about the kingdom of God...starting with the idea that the Kingdom is about the possibility, or that the kingdom of God is an upside-down kingdom. Christian reminded us that kingdom of God is made manifest in real and Jesus. Tony and I preached about the kingdom of God is about freedom and jubilee. So let me ask again, "How would you define the Kingdom of God?"

This is one of those concepts that we talk a lot about. In fact, we pray every single week that God's "kingdom would come here on earth as it is in heaven." But if you and I run an elevator ride (socially distanced, of course- with our masks on!) what would you tell me is the kingdom of God? I mean it...really, what would you say?

Pause for a second... (I promise that I won't go anywhere) write it down, think about it for a second.

How do you define the kingdom of God?

Do you know what it feels like?

Have you seen it?

Have you experienced it?

What do you believe is the dream of that kingdom that God has for each of us?

This matters, because this summer as we're talking about being a Kingdom People, we're not just doing this as an intellectual exercise, but because we believe that God cares about the real of our lives.

Do we take our faith seriously? Do we really want to be a kingdom people? We want to be a people who don't just pray "thy kingdom come" but be a people who LIVE the kingdom, a people who know and experience and breathe in and out the kingdom in our skin.

It is our prayer that we might be a Kingdom people, people who experience hope in our relationships. People who remember God's vision for kingdom and are so shaped by in that as we live in relationship with one another in the midst of our political differences, we don't kill each other. Right? That is what we're praying about when we say "thy kingdom come"...we're praying for something real, an actuality. A coming kingdom that is both here and also that which we long for.

And so how you define kingdom, how you know speak about it, how you discern if it's present, all of that matters matters. So might continue to think about and wrestle with our own defining what the Kingdom of God is and know our answers to the questions: How would you define the Kingdom of God and what it means to be a kingdom people?



In my speaking today about the kingdom of God, I come to you as one who is rooted in the deep belief that this kingdom is good news for the real of our lives...for all of our lives. But as you know, humans sometimes struggle to live into and understand and embrace the idea that this good news could actually be for us.

In asking you to consider what it means to be a kingdom people, I want you to know that for me, I would in part define the kingdom as freedom...and I know what that freedom feels like in my bones. Do you? The kingdom's presence in my life is the place and moment where I know that there is enough to breathe, where I know that I am seen and able to see you as well. That's kingdom.

Yet I think that so much of human existence is one in which we struggle to actually believe or live as if the kingdom is actually for us. This reminds me of the C.S. Lewis quote in which he says:

It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

– C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory, and Other Addresses*

For even though we have this kingdom right before us, that is life and freedom and goodness, we are so often we're like a kid who's in the city, hanging out, making mud pies. And when Jesus comes along and is all like, "Hey, come take a vaca at the beach!" You're respond, "No, really, I prefer to just hang out here in the city with my mud pie, because I know this and going to the beach, well, that's scary."

And let me just say: ABSOLUTELY! It is! We sometimes talk and act as if change and goodness is so obvious but the truth of the matter is that we've all learned ways to survive and live in the world; we've developed carefully constructed ways to stay safe and powerful (we think) and protect our egos. And living into a new way of being, becoming a kingdom person means there are certain things of our ego, of protecting ourselves, and the ways we've been taught to live that we need to die... so that we can truly live. So that we might enjoy the beauty of God's kingdom seashore.

So I ask you again: what does the kingdom look like? What does it feel like? Do you know it in your bones?

Really. Pause. Take a minute and sit with those questions.

What does the kingdom look like? What does it feel like? Do you know it in your bones?



Because here's the thing: in talking about the kingdom of God and what means for us to be a kingdom people and asking you to consider what you think this means, I'm wanting to bring us into another aspect of the kingdom of God, namely the idea that the kingdom that God brings isn't a kingdom of our imaginations with a king and a queen and a prince and maybe a Cinderella or something. No, this kingdom might more aptly be named a KIN-DOM: the place in the reign and the rule of God, which makes possible live-ability and familial ways of being that honor all of us. God's kingdom is actually a kin-dom for where everyone is invited to come home and live as members of this family. Living kin-dom then is part of what it means to be a kingdom people.

So I invite you to journey with me today to take a little glimpse at the seashore life that God is inviting us into as we explore some of my concerns when we seek to understand God's kingdom in terms of the paradigms of kingdoms on earth, and in so doing to pick up an invitation to rethink about God's kingdom as a kin-dom, for (as I will argue) I believe that promise and possibility of living the kin-dom in the real of our lives, in this time *right now*, will open us up even more so that we can then affirm the good news together, saying: "I know what the kingdom looks like. I know what that feels like, because I'm getting to live it now!"

Let's turn then to a bit more about this idea of the kingdom as a kin-dom. I was first exposed to the idea that the kingdom of God and naming it as such due to our truncated imaginations in view of the kingdoms of this world might actually be limiting our understanding of what God is actually up to in our lives and the world when I read a book by Sallie McFague called *Models of God*. In it she speaks about how our task and work as Christians is to live and interpret the Bible in our time. She argues that our scriptures, which are rife with beautiful metaphors aren't meant to be the ends in themselves, but the things that point us and invite us into the fullness of what God desires for us.¹

But sometimes our theology gets ossified. We make the metaphor the thing, instead of the thing to which it is pointing. And so we get stuck and locked in just like that kid who's playing in the mud and responds to a new idea like, "Nope, I'm playing in the mud in the city, folks." And so McFague asks us to see the ways in which the metaphors were meant to build bridges to the people for whom the text was originally written so that they might encounter the one who is beyond the paradigms and prejudices of any time. Thus we are invited to rethink and reimagine the reality of who God is and ask if some metaphors might need to change so that we might move more deeply into the reality of who God is. For her, one of these metaphors is that of Kingdom. She notes how the idea of kingdom is constrained by feudal imaginations, which actually run contrary to the reality and reign of God that is made clear throughout scripture. More on this in a minute. Let me turn next though to another author who has deeply shaped my language in the sermon today: Ada María Isasi-Díaz

¹ Sallie McFague, *Models of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987).



Ada María Isasi-Díaz was a Latina theologian and ethicist who wrote extensively about faith and life. Throughout her work she talked about how the better way into us more deeply grasping God's vision for humanity, and the gospel invitation is to move from language of the kingdom of God to the kin-dom of God. The place and way of being in which we are all invited and there is enough for each of us.²

Both of these authors, along with others, name concerns with us continuing to employ kingdom language that is shaped by and primarily understood first in human terms. This is because for so long throughout human history, the way that we've organized ourselves is that there was a King, and then there were a bunch of serfs and folks who didn't have any power or rights. We see in the earliest accounting of God's people of Israel that God challenges them not to have a King, but to actually put the tabernacle at the center of their entire community because they were called to be different and place God alone at the center *but also* as reminder to them that another world was possible: a good news indeed to a people who only knew a world in which there were King and there were slaves and servants, a people who themselves had been enslaved for 400 years and only had known this existence, putting the tabernacle at the center of their social and political organization was intended to invite them to re-imagine what it might mean to be a people chosen and called by God, and re-orient themselves to how they could be free human people, in alignment with how God was interested in showing up in the world.

And how does God first show up in the world? We are told that God walked in the garden with Adam and Eve. Not incredibly kingly, right? More like a God who is interested being "God-with-us." We see this again then in the life of Jesus, that God puts on human form and comes to dwell amongst us. And so this language of "Kingdom of God," sometimes it gets us stuck where we then live out of faith that, instead of it being faith that calls us to show up in the world as grownups, as people who take responsibility for our lives, as ones who know that the call to follow Christ is a call to freedom, we instead take on a new way of being that is patterned after the ways of being that our world already believes in. One in which we give away our power and remain stuck in the patterns of this world instead of being born again and again into new life and new ways of being human.

Kingdom language sometimes keeps us stuck thinking maybe one day Prince Charming will save us, but the kingdom that God brings is one in which we are already saved, one in which we are invited to fully rise up into the image of God, that God has already placed uniquely within each of us. And then, as each of us rise up fully to be people who are grown up in our lives and in our faith- taking responsibility, we become a true kin-dom people who extend recognition, community, and love to and with one another.

So not only do I think this language of kin-dom is helpful, because it invites us to really live more deeply into the ways of God, to know in our bones that seashore ~~promise that God wants~~ for us, but I think it is fundamentally THE vision of what

² Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).



Jesus means when he teaches us to pray and live in such a way that “your kingdom might come.”

To pray and live *kin-dom* instead of *kingdom* is a deeply, truly biblical way to, in our time, live out the promise of what God has always been about: that God is a God who wants us to be a people who walk in the garden with God and one another. If you don't believe me, take a look at the whole of the Bible. Is God trying to be a kingdom dictator, is God trying to make us slaves? No, God is always fundamentally about relationship and rising people up to be the fullness of the image that God has placed in them so that we might live as heirs and children of the promise!

Even more so, here in the book of John, it is clear that the vision of the gospel is a vision of a family: a kin-dom. From the very beginning of the book of John, we read language equating Jesus with God the Father, and this language is deeply familial language, inviting us to understand that what Jesus is about isn't a new fiefdom, his overthrow of the powers of this world isn't to then re-create a new this-worldly kingdom, but rather it's about making possible a new way of being human and being in relationship to God and God's work in the world.

Throughout the book of John we are invited over and over again to be a people who are re-born (as Jesus tells Nicodemus in chapter three): “Not of human desire or of the flesh,” but by the Spirit so that we might join the family of God and follow Jesus in living the law of love that Jesus is inviting us into: where we are called friends.

In chapter 14, right before the passage that we read for today, Jesus notes that in his father's house there are many rooms, and we're invited into the family. And then as we come here to chapter 15, we're invited to abide in in Christ so that that way we can live in love.

And that is the command we are given: the command to love one another, to lay down our lives, to be friends with all of God's children, just as God has called and named us friends. No longer are we servants or slaves under some master. No, we are instead invited to follow brother Jesus in living in this new way of being. This is the command, this is the kingdom that we are invited into. It is an invitation for each of us to take up responsibility for our lives, to be a people who live with freedom, who seek justice and mercy as we walk humbly with God, who seek to fulfill the fullness of the law of love, which is that we do indeed lay down our lives for one another.

No longer are we people who just obey a king as his subjects. We are a people who are called to rise up, to take our rightful place in this family, and then to look around and realize that this is a world-wide, all of creation family where each of us are equals. We are siblings. We are a people then who are a kin-dom. The kingdom that God is bringing and has indeed already made present in our midst, is one of a kin-dom. It is a promise that is for each of us. It is an invitation into a way of life and a way of being, and it matters for how we live our lives. For if we continue to live our lives in relationship to the invitation to faith as one that is framed by human models



and metaphors of kingdoms, it will mean and results in anti-God's way of being. When we are caught up in the limitations of our human conceptions of kingdom, it means that we will perpetually struggle to remember that the whole reason that we say "Jesus is Lord," is because by doing so it means Caesar is not. And if we forget this and forget that the gospel invitation is into a family then we will keep on ordering our lives in response to earthly powers and imaginations and will give away our power to the kings of this earth who promise to fortify our egos and keep us from having to awaken to the seashore kin-dom family. For God's kingdom is a kin-dom where we're invited to take up the responsibility to love and lay down our lives. This kin-dom, this invitation that we have matters then also not just because we give away our power to external sources, but as the fairy tales suggest, when we are locked into human conceptions of kingdom and think that following Jesus is like a game of Simon Says instead of an invitation into a family and a way of life, it fosters in us helplessness, like there is nothing we can do in the face of the evils of this world. So we then pray "thy kingdom come," but we forget that Jesus isn't Prince Charming, Jesus is the truth that animates our ability to live our lives in answer to the prayer and be a people who are bringers of the kingdom not just passive, helpless witnesses in view of the machinations of evil in our time.

To be a kin-dom people is then is to live the gospel promise and grace, knowing and living as if we know in our bones that Jesus has already saved us and is in the business of saving us right now: to be a kin-dom people is to know that being born again is a process of releasing our egos, dying to the things that are actually killing us so that we might be free to actually live.

So let's not play and be content with the dirt! Let's instead follow the call of Jesus to go to the seashore and then look around at the beautiful people gathered there as we together embrace the good news that is for the real of our lives, that allows us to look at each other and see the image of God because we have known that real good news of the Jesus who says, "I have called you friends. I have laid down my life."

How can we do anything less? May we be a people, a people of this kin-dom, of *this family*. And of this kin-dom may there be no end.

It is good news **for all of us**, my dear friends. Let us pray together.

God, you know that the invitation and the call to be a people who orient our lives to what you are about in the world is sometimes scary and painful, and we don't know if we really want it. But God, we know we're not alone, and so we pray indeed that by your Spirit's breath, love, and life, that you would breathe on us and in our midst that we might be a kin-dom people, a people who bear witness to a kingdom that is not by power nor might, but by your Spirit. And kingdom is not of this earth, but is a kin-dom, a family, where we are all your children. So God, may we live with courage and good faith as ones who are dearly beloved, and may we extend deep welcome and lay down our lives one for another. For it is in the name of Christ, our brother, our savior, and our friend that we pray. Amen.

1 Then I saw new heavens and a new earth. The former heavens and the former earth had passed away, and the sea existed no longer. 2 I also saw a new Jerusalem, the holy city, coming down out of heaven from God, radiant as those getting married are on their wedding day. 3 And I heard a loud voice calling from the throne,

*“Look! God’s Tabernacle is among humankind!
God will tabernacle amongst them;
they will be God’s people.
and God will be fully present with them;
4 The Most High will wipe every tear from their eyes.
And death, mourning, crying, and pain will be no more,
for the old order has fallen.”*

5 The One who was seated on the throne said, “Look! I am making everything new!” and added, “Write this, for what I am saying is trustworthy and true.” 6 And that One continued, “It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give drink freely from the spring of the water of life. 7 This is the rightful inheritance of the over-comers. I will be their God and they will be my children. 8 But the legacy of cowards, the unfaithful, the depraved, the murderers, the fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars is the burning lake of fiery sulphur, which is the second death.”

- Revelation 21:1-8

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Well, good morning and welcome to worship! I am joining you this morning from a boat in northern Wisconsin, which seemed appropriate given that the sermon is entitled “A New Heaven and a New Earth.” So greetings to you from here in the midst of creation. As we begin, will you pray with me?

God of all creation, indeed of earth and of the sky... this morning, as we come to worship, we come with earnest hearts—and hearts filled with a lot of other things—but we’re here. So God, by your Spirit and by your breeze and breath and air, might you open us to yourself and, in so doing, open us to all things of life: to one another, and this world, for it’s in Christ’s name that we gather and pray. Amen.

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When I was a little girl, I would go visit my dad who lived in Colorado (and then in Illinois, Missouri, and eventually in Arizona). The best part about having divorced parents was that ever since I was about five years old, I got to fly on airplanes all by myself which, if you know anything about me, you know that I

loved adventuring and doing it by myself. It was so fun! I got to meet the pilots and they would be so nice to me and give me wings. It was great. One of my favorite parts about flying though was when the plane would begin to lower in the sky and I would look out of the window seat, which I still to this day will request, and I would see the landscape of my homeland...Minnesota.

Ever since my family immigrated to the United States, predominantly from Sweden but also Norway and Germany, Minnesota has been our land. It's been the place where my great-great grandma, my great-grandma, my grandma, my mom, and myself (to trace my matrilineal line), where we were lived and, minus my great-great grandma, we all were all born. And as places are won't to do, they become part of us; they get in our bones; the water runs like the blood in our veins. And every time a plane would come out of the clouds and I would look down in the lakes and I could point them out because I knew them, I knew I was home.

Have you ever felt that way?

Where the place becomes part of who you are?

Where a landscape itself is sacred?

Where you emerge into it and you can breathe because you know that you are home?

The lakes and the land of Minnesota have been that for me. I went to college at the University of Minnesota Duluth, and my favorite memories from my time there are of when the mist and the fog would roll in and it was as if heaven came closer to earth for just a little bit. And the magic of Gitchi Gami would rise up out of the waters and envelop me, and I knew that God was there.

I've had similar experiences throughout my life, whether it was the Summer Solstice on top of Cadillac Mountain with Andy in Acadia National Park, or whether it was the sun dancing behind the mountains of the Collegiate Peaks as I was backpacking the Continental Divide with a bunch of ninth graders, or whether it was times spent at camp in the middle of the woods, when the Spirit had bubbled up something different, different than we had known in the time at home with our phones and God got to work and show up in God's way in the mystery and sacredness of those woods and that place. So, how about you? Is it a lake, maybe like this one? Time spent in the Boundary Waters, at a family cabin, or perhaps it is the land and the place where our church sits?

Indeed, in our process of Re-Forming, one of the core values that we articulated was IMMERSE: "Immerse in sacred spaces and rhythms." And the reason this became one of our named values is because so many of us noted

the ways in which the Meetinghouse, the way that space *itself* was a sacred 798 place for us, a place where we had encountered God in the rhythms of our lives, where marriages and baptisms and confirmations had transpired, where our lives were transformed in a place.

Place matters. Land matters for who we are and our ability to flourish and walk in this land. And so today, as we continue our series about what it means for us to be a “Kingdom People,” together we will consider and wrestle a bit more with what it means that we are a people, a people who claim to follow and pray for God and God’s kingdom to come here on earth as it is in heaven.

So today, as we continue our series on a “Kingdom People,” we want to wrestle a little bit with what does it mean that we are people who live on this land, in this time? And what does it mean for us then to pray for God’s kingdom to come; to live out a reality of a new heaven and a new earth and to do so in the face of the reality of climate crisis, environmental degradation, and the reality that right now, folks are burning up in the Southwest of the United States on account of forest fires.

What does this mean? Does it say, speak, or call anything to/from us as people who claim the name of Christ and who want to walk the kingdom way?

Even if this conversation is new to you or feels a bit uncomfortable, I hope that you’ll stay in it, because our hope in doing this series on “Kingdom People” is that we want to be a people who root in, who refuse the ways in which the partisanship of our time prevents us from hearing the call of Christ, and to live more deeply into what does it mean to be a people who pray this prayer every week for God’s kingdom to come, that we might indeed then be a people who are “Kingdom People” together.

Sallie McFague, Christian theologian and author, writes about what it means to be a people who follow Christ and who live in a time of climate change.¹ She talks about how indeed we live in a space of environmental crisis. And that for us, this actually is a theological problem. It invites us to ask serious questions about how we understand who we are and who this God is. In her book, *A New Climate for Theology*, she notes how very often our ways of encountering our spirituality have largely been from a psychological framework. It’s about our own inner lives and souls, but this in many ways actually has something to do with New Age theology, where it’s just about me feeling good and not having to be encountered by the God who works in history and in all of creation. And so she invites us, as I am going to do today as well, to take seriously what it means to be a people whose faith not only transforms us on the inside, but then invites us to live differently in the way that we show up in the world and

¹ Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

Now, the reality is that for far too long in Western Christianity, our faith has not actually been very shaped by Scripture, but instead it's been shaped by philosophies that view the human as higher and above all of the rest of creation. This is what's known as the "dominion model": it's one in which the earth is merely ours to use, and we can do whatever we want with it. Now, some of you might not have tuned into this sort of awareness of how we have been formed back when you were kids, but I remember how much I internalized this model when I was a kid.

While I was growing up I'd go to church and hear stuff about new heaven and new earth and it was like, "Well, God's going to blow everything up anyway...so, like, who really cares? I mean thank goodness, I'm not like Buddhist or something. I can like crush bugs and eat whatever I want and get all of this cool stuff!" Now, of course, I look back at myself both with compassion— because we all grow—but also with grief because following Jesus doesn't mean that we don't care about this world. We claim a faith that says God became embodied and dwelt amongst us. We follow a God who we name as Creator and Sustainer and Redeemer of all of life. So does this not then invite us to show up in the world to live in a way that is in partnership with the ways in which God would desire for us to live?

Theology matters. How we understand who God is and how we then make sense of ourselves matters. So if we say we want to be a Kingdom People then it matters how we think of God and ourselves for if we understand and think about ourselves and this world as just something that's going to burn up and doesn't matter, it impacts the way that we live our lives. Some of this can be seen in the ways that some folks who claim the name of Christ dealt with the westward movement across our country: where carcasses of buffaloes would pile up, where Native people were not treated as ones equally made in the image of God. And so right now, today, we have the opportunity and the invitation instead to join with God who is God the Creator and Redeemer and Sustainer of all of creation. And we do so, indeed, by becoming a Kingdom People who care about and who participate in the caring for all of God's creation, and all of humanity.

What I'm saying is deeply rooted in a Scriptural invitation and in the way of faith. The Biblical vision is clear, going way back to chapter one of Genesis, right? Where does the story start? It starts in creation. God creates the heavens and the earth and all living things and there's day and there's night and they're separated from one another. There's fish and there are all kinds of animals. All of this creating happens and God says it's *really good* **before** we

² McFague, 34.

humans even show up. And yet when we do, when the earth creature is formed from out of the dust of the earth, the earth creature is *not given a task to rule over, but to care for*, to restore the goodness of God's creation that God has made. This witness of God as Creator is one that is echoed throughout the text of our Scriptures. The Psalms again and again, name God as the one who is the creator of the heavens and the earth, the wonder and the marvel of creation. 800

The book of Colossians also names, that by God all things were created in heaven and in earth: "For by God all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created by God and for God." (Col 1:16)

So central to our faith and our way of being in the world should therefore be a commitment to a belief that God is the Creator of all things. And if God is Creator, does that not invite something from us to honor the creation? For in so doing, we honor the God who is the creator of all of life. This should be one of the central aspects of our understanding of what it means to be a Kingdom People: we are a people who get to partner with God the Creator, the creator of all life and become people who foster the conditions of life and of creation both in ourselves and in the world that God has fashioned.

Not only is the Biblical vision one of God is creator, it is also one of God as Sustainer. The idea of God as Sustainer of all living things begins at the beginning: God is the one who breathes breath into our nostrils. God is the one who we are invited to live in right relationship with because we can't do it on our own. Even looking at Levitical law, whenever an Israelite would kill an animal, it wasn't like the got to do whatever and kill as many as they wanted as if no one really cares. No, they had to bring the animal before the priest.³ This is because throughout the text there is a clear sense of everything comes from God and so we don't get to just do whatever we want because God is the Sustainer. Without God, the *creator* now *sustaining* life, there wouldn't be any life of which to speak, we wouldn't be here. So to think that we're powerful and can do whatever we want fundamentally violates the Biblical vision of who this God is and who we are then called to be.

Not only though is God Creator and Sustainer, but God is also Redeemer. We see this even in the beginning, when folks are like, "Hey, listen, I know we were walking in the garden with God and everything was good, but we're just going to do our own thing." God immediately says, "Hey, I'm here to make things new. Let's get back to the garden. Live in right relationship with me and with one another and with all of creation." And so even as the people come out of being enslaved in Exodus, God promises them a *place*, a land where there will

³ cf.: Leviticus 17

be plenty enough for everyone to eat, freedom in every sense, and sustainability for their lives and their wellbeing. This is part of the vision that they see when they get to the mountain top and look over into that land: they see a LAND. It's a land, a good land, a broad land, says Exodus. 801

This land is a world where God cares for all of creation, where when the flood comes, it isn't just the humans who are saved. No, the animals and all living things matter, for God is about *life*: life and flourishing of all that God has created. So this is the vision of God: as Creator, Sustainer, and as Redeemer, but fundamentally central to all of this is the idea that God becomes incarnate amongst us, that the God who has created the body of the earth and our bodies in God's image shows up in a human body to tell us that there is a different way for us to live, for we have forgotten how to live the garden promise. And yet we're invited to participate in this new creation and in the way things are meant to be in view of the God who has dwelt amongst us.

As Romans 8:20 recounts, creation is groaning as if in childbirth awaiting this fullness of God's love and embodied freedom to come or, as 2 Corinthians reminds us: When we are in Christ, we are a new creation.⁴ to be, and to live this way then is to strip ourselves of the ego things where we think that we need power and dominion. And instead to walk the way of Jesus, who being in very nature God took on human form and dwelt amongst us.

So why then has so much of the history of our faith seemed to have forgotten this? Why is it that so often we look for a faith that will save us out of this world instead of encountering the Christ who meets us *in this world*, and then join with God and the caring for God's creation?

I don't know all the reasons, but I think a lot of it has to do with fear.

One of the things about me that most of you don't know is I'm not a good swimmer, I'm pretty bad, actually. I think that's fundamentally why I hate being in the water, because when I was in Hawaii on my honeymoon, I almost drowned (That was awesome!). Or even now right in this boat on the lake, I am where I like to be: I'm on top of the water, thank you very much. Because if I go in, I know there are muskies and there is seaweed...and a lot of other things that are bigger than me which I can't control.

And so much of our lives have been structured around trying to clench our fists and seek control. **But this is not the kingdom way.** This is not the kingdom invitation for us. The invitation is for us to encounter the God of the wild, the God who is bigger than us, the God who is found in the creation itself, in that which we can't control...and our inability to control it isn't the problem.

⁴ Cf.: II Cor 5:17.

It is instead an invitation into life where we encounter and embrace our vulnerabilities and our fragility, knowing that we are held and sustained by the Creator of all life. 802

Last year as Andy and I were miscarrying, I listened to a song on repeat from the latest album by Mumford & Sons. The song was called “The Wild.”⁵ And as painful and excruciating as it was (and is) to know that I wasn’t going to get to parent that child on the earth, there was a sense of love that washed over me as I listened and wept, knowing that what I was experiencing and encountering in my grief was the wildness of life and the God who held and sustained me...and that there was more life for me to encounter, if I would just let myself be held.

In her book, *The Hour of Land*, eco-feminist activist and writer Terry Tempest Williams writes about our National Parks and notes that we fear the wild and the wilderness seek to control it. She writes:

In the desert, success is the understanding of limits. One false move and you die. You can’t talk your way out of thirst. Bare skin burns. Face-to-face with a spitting rattlesnake, the only thing you have to negotiate is your escape. There are rules in the desert. Pay attention. Adapt or perish.⁶

To fear the wild and seek to control it is not the pathway of life. No, rather the pathway of life is to go deeper in. Perhaps this is why so often throughout the Scriptures, the place where people go for renewal and to be encountered by God is to the wilderness...to the desert. For there everything is stripped bare and our human pretensions of power, they dissolve as we are exposed...not to kill us, but because there is beauty in the exposure, which opens us up to be a people who are transformed, a people who encounter the God of the wild so that we might truly live.

This then is the Revelation vision, not one in which God comes and nukes the world and gets a new one. No. The vision of Revelation is one instead where we are reminded that the Genesis beginning (Alpha) and the Revelation ending (Omega) is the story of this God who as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer, holds all things.

The vision in Revelation is not one when we’re, “Beam(ed) me up, Scotty.” The end times is not a rapture. No, instead it’s a vision of a God whose kingdom, whose New Jerusalem comes and *is present here on earth*. In Revelation, God takes up dwelling here with us humans forever...and we live differently.

⁵ Mumford & Sons, “The Wild,” *Delta* (London: Gentlemen of the Road, 2018).

⁶ Terry Tempest Williams, *The Hour of Land* (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2016), 197.

This is the vision of the God who makes all things new, and not in a way that obliterates it the world, but a newness that allows it to freely flourish in the ways that God intended. This vision of the “new things” is shared then in Isaiah and throughout the Bible (Isaiah 65:17-25 and 43:18-19); this is the vision of the God who is making things new who is about setting things right, about the kingdom coming indeed, here on earth, as it is in heaven.

Revelation’s vision is about God’s reign, God’s way of being, as being present in us and in the world. And so this vision, when it happens is of a new heaven and new earth, the Jerusalem where there is no more crying. It’s the place where we get to walk back home to the garden, to the place where we were meant to live. It’s this earth as our garden home.

Sallie McFague talks about how, if you break down the word *ecology* in Greek, it’s really just the word *oikos* meaning home and *logos* meaning word. It’s connected to our words, ecological, ecumenical, and economic, and, as McFague argues: if salvation is seen as the flourishing of God’s household, then we must see these three words as being held together for, at its simplest, ecology, is words about home.⁷

And what does John remind us about in his gospel? That in the beginning was *logos*, the word, the word that calls us home to know how to live rightly in this world and in relationship to the earth and to one another. Hence, being people, a kingdom people who care about and are committed to the flourishing of all of creation, isn’t some new age theology. No, instead it’s a return to the fundamental cosmology that we were meant to live within: where we live as a people who walk with God and one another in this creation, cared for by it and caring for it as well.

As I noted earlier, how we see God and how we see ourselves matters. Are we willing to live inside of a vision where we are called to be people who live out a *home word*, an ecology, an economics that is connected to the care for the whole of the household, where we are stewards? We are called to care for this household of which we are a part. This is the dream of the mountain top joining with God’s dream, for a kingdom and a world and a vision like Revelation...a vision of a new heavens and a new earth, not in a retreat back to garden, but a new city where God dwells amongst all of God’s people and all of the land, such that this world is not destroyed, but that it is instead restored.

Revelation 21 through 22 offers us a wonderful eschatological, meaning the end and the way in the being of all things, where now those of us who joined together with God get to know a land and a place where the earth is cared for,

⁷ McFague, 33 and 48.

where lions and lambs lay down with one another, where there is no more crying and we cease living as people in exile in Babylon, meaning people who have forgotten the garden way. 804

Might we be just such a people, a Kingdom People, a people who don't seek to preserve ego or live so as to have power and dominion over one another and over creation, but instead to be a people, a Kingdom People, people who join with the God who makes all things new.

To be a Kingdom People calls us to live our lives and order ourselves towards action, to have a theology that then invites us out into the world. As theologian John Caputo writes, "The love of God is something we do namely to praise God and have compassion for the world."⁸

So we have a choice as to how we will live. Will we live as a people who spurn the Creator, who refuse to live in alignment with the Sustainer who say, "I don't need to participate with the Redeemer," and instead live our lives, just using one another in the world?

Goodness, I hope not. I hope that we will live our lives in answer to the prayer that we pray each Sunday, to live in view of the reality of who God is and the reality of what's going on in our world.

There are intentional ways that we can do this, ways that we can provide home for each other and care for this earth and the planet...for us to be transformed, to repent, to be different, to be committed to here on earth, creating the possibilities and the flourishing for the flourishing of all of life and all of creation to be changed and transformed. The grace of God is made present and real in creation from the mountaintops at Acadia to the valleys to Yosemite to the 10,000 lakes (or however many we have floating around in Minnesota). This land was made for all of us.

So might we join with the vision of Revelation of a new heavens and a new earth where the angels indeed will sing, "Holy, holy, holy. The whole earth is full of God's glory." Let's be a Kingdom People and let's care for this creation together. Amen.

⁸ John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 141.



People of the Promise

Genesis 12:1-9

Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you, I will curse. And in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

So Abram went as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was 75 years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife, Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran, and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan.

When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem to the Oak of Moreh. At that time, the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.' So he built there an altar to the Lord who had appeared to him. From there, he moved on to the hill country on the east side of Bethel and pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord, and Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

- Genesis 12:1-9

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Good morning. Will you pray with me?

God of all history and of all time and all people, on this day as we gather, we want to center ourselves in you, in the story of your working, your invitations, and your love. God, indeed by your Spirit, might you breathe and meet us this day, that we might your people and that we indeed might be the church. For it's in Christ's name that we are.

Amen.

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Well, again, good morning. It's so good to be with you. I'm Sara, one of the ministers here at Colonial Church. As you may have heard from Jeff last week, we've begun a series this fall in which we're exploring what it means for us to "Be the Church," to be a people who—gathered together in whatever form—center ourselves and our lives in love of God, the love of neighbor, and the love of one another.



As we move through our series this fall, we thought what a better way for us to explore what it means for us to deepen into being the church than to journey with God and the story of God's people going all the way back to Genesis! So that is what we are going to do each week.

Last week then Jeff invited us into the series through that curtain that was torn in two, opening for us an encounter with Jesus so that we might be the church. And now we will turn to the great drama and story of God's working in our midst throughout all of time, and indeed in this very moment by journeying through the Bible.

Today, we'll begin with Genesis. Next week, we'll move into Exodus. We'll skip a few of the books, because we're not going to do this sermon series for 66 weeks in a row, folks (just so you know)! Our hope and aim in journeying through the Bible as we seek to "Be the Church" is: 1) to get more deeply into the text of the Bible so that we might re-encounter the God who has been journeying with God's people throughout all of time that we might be formed likewise in God's image, and then; 2) for us, rooted in that place of deepening faith, to sit with the questions and to live the answers of what it means for us to be the church.

Of course, in this exploration of the Bible as we seek to "Be the Church," it's our hope, and mine in particular today as I bring us into Genesis, to give us some tools, some collective language, and some ways to get into the Bible and this story of God and God's people that is told in the text.

Every week as we go through each of these books of the Bible, exploring what it means to "Be the Church," we're also going to be sharing with you some passages from that book of the Bible so that we can be reading along with one another and sitting with the text for the rest of the week. We'll also have some questions for you to consider and if you have any interest in joining either in a small group either physically distant here at the church or virtually, we're going to have some opportunities for you to gather with others to discuss the text, to wrestle with one another, and to pray together as we seek to Be the Church.

OK—enough preamble, right? So let's delve in! Today we're starting at the beginning, which quite aptly is what Genesis is named in the Hebrew Bible: "In the beginning..." because, indeed, this is the beginning of the Bible and the narrative about what happened in the beginning.

Genesis kicks off a five-book section which includes: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. We call these five books the Pentateuch, meaning "the five." In the Jewish tradition, these five books are known as the Torah, meaning the instructions about what it means to be God's people. The Torah aims to root the people in the story of God and God's relationship to God's people, reminding them, and reminding us, from whence we have come and of the God who since the beginning not only created and formed all life, but has also walked with us in the



garden, the place to which God is always longing for us to return, that we might walk naked, unafraid, and unashamed with God and with one another.

These five books of the Torah start off with the creation of the heavens and the earth in Genesis and move forward to the precipice of the Promised Land at the end of Deuteronomy. The books are a compilation of varied oral traditions that God's people told each other around fires, seated at tables, or out gathering sheep—stories about who YHWH was, who Elohim was in their lives, reminding each other of the stories of their ancestors and of the God that they sought to follow and serve; as we're reminded of in Deuteronomy and the Shema: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one, and you shall worship God with all that you are."¹

This is the story of a people of promise, a people who are called and invited to walk with God and one another, looking for God's work and movement and redemption in our world, coming into deeper alignment with the God of all creation. These stories were compiled by editors to become the text that we now have which tells us truly the deep story of who God is. This oral tradition and editorial collection is why you'll see things like at the beginning of Genesis there are two different accounts of creation, because the stories that the various communities in Israel would tell each other about who God is and was were told a bit differently, and when brought together they deepen the story and offer us a bigger picture of who God is and who God wanted to be in their midst.

Now, the book of Genesis is pretty short, a mere 50 chapters(!). This is why as a kid, whenever I would start reading my Bible and I had these good intentions to read book by book by book, each time I would start at Genesis 1 and then I'd get through all the way to Genesis 50, and I would keep reading, and I'd get to Exodus...I could keep going. Then I got to Leviticus. It got a little rough. Numbers was even rougher. Deuteronomy, if I could make it to Deuteronomy, I knew I was going to really make it, because Joshua came next, and that had some really good stories in it!

So today I want to also summarize a little bit of what's going on in these 50 chapters as we consider what it means for us to "Be the Church" and live as people of promise. In the *People's Companion to the Bible*, they give a really helpful summary of Genesis, which is the ultra-cliff notes version of how to read Genesis.

They divide the book of Genesis into two parts: Part I: Genesis 1-11. This is about creation and early humanity. Okay, fair enough, right? Creator God, early humanity...eleven chapters, done! Then we have Genesis 12-50, these are the stories of the ancestors. All right. Got it? 1-11: Creation, creator God, the earliest stories, and 12-50: the stories of the ancestors.²

¹ Deuteronomy 6:4-9.

² Curtiss Paul Deyoung, Wilda C Gafney, Leticia Guardiola-Saenz, George Tinker, and Frank M. Yamada, eds., *People's Companion to the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).



The *People's Companion to the Bible* further summarizes the next four books of the Torah: Exodus is about liberation and then the revelation at Sinai, which again is repeated some more in Leviticus. Numbers is about how they're in the wilderness and they're wandering about trying to get to the Promised Land. In Deuteronomy, they re-covenant with God and they're on the precipice of the Promised Land. There you go. Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. That's your ultra-cliff notes version. You are totally good to go now, right? Right.³

As we read this text, it's a good reminder to ourselves that this is the accounting of the story of God moving in the midst of God's people. It's grounding us then, too, in who this God is and how God shows up and wants to continue to show up in our world and in our lives. It is a powerful story recounting the ways in which God, since the very beginning, shows up with and through and to a human people.

One of the things I love about the Bible is that it isn't a law book. It's not some systematic theology text. No, it's a story which brings us into the story of who God is where real people journeyed with God and had their lives transformed. What could be more relevant for our lives? For faith is not another systematic theology text, but it's an invitation to join God in God's story, to awaken to the way that God wants us to live, and to then live in relationship out of that place, and that truth of having God meet us in the story in our own lives.

So Genesis then is the story that begins with the God who creates, fashioning life out of chaos, the one who makes things of *tov*, goodness and beauty. All of creation, day and night, animals and humans, the stars and the moon, all of these things are fashioned. In these first five chapters of Genesis, we're brought into this universal story of this God who has created.

Then as we come to chapter 6 through 11, we have the story about the recreation that happens when the world goes sideways, and there's the flood and a promise that is made again to the people. And, as I noted earlier, in chapters 12 to 50 we have the stories of the ancestors: the stories of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar, of Isaac and Rebecca and Leah, of Jacob and Rachel and their sons, of Joseph and slavery that will then come.

Now, if you're reading Genesis all of the way through, one of the things that you might struggle with as I did when I was younger is trying to figure out what's descriptive in the story (just telling us what happened) and proscriptive (meaning it's reflective of God's agreement with what transpires). This is important to sort through because honestly, there's some things in this text which to us, if you're reading it, you're like, "What *is this*?!" And rightly so. It's normal to have questions and concerns about what is going on in the text as you read about a people who engaged in practices like polygamy and slavery, who forced enslaved women to bear children for them. What do we do with these sorts of texts as people who

³ See: *People's Companion to the Bible*.



follow God?

I think as we read the text, it's helpful to remember that this is the story of God journeying with a people who themselves lived in a particular time and a particular place, and to look for that thread and the way that God's arc and narrative promise shows up again and again (that would be the proscriptive part, the rest, I'd argue is descriptive). Even though Abraham and Sarah forget the truth of the promise to which they are called and they use and abuse a woman who doesn't have any rights in order to have a child, when she is an exile to the desert, God shows up and the first person to name God is this woman Hagar as God is the one who sees me.⁴

We go into the story to open ourselves to the God who is not only journeying with people, but also inviting people to move more deeply into embodying God's promise: which is for life, for freedom, for a garden reality for all people. This is the promise of Genesis. It's a promise that says - "Yes! God created, the world's messed up, but God isn't done with all of us or with creation." So we are invited to remember, to go back to the garden and get into alignment so that we can live from that place of walking with God and with one another and be a people of promise. This is God's vision and God's desire.

We then come to the text that was read for us this morning in Genesis 12, which I picked for today out of the whole of the 50 chapters because I figured you didn't want me to preach on all 50 chapters directly, but also because this text is a central text in our understanding of what it means that Genesis is not only about creation and the creator God, but about the God who is the God of promise who invites us to live the promise. As you heard in Genesis 12, it opens up with God showing up to Abram and saying, *"I need you to leave from your country and your kindred and go to this land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will make your name great so that you will be a blessing."*

A couple of points that I want to uplift from this particular part of the passage. The first thing is this. Where does Genesis 12 fall in the Bible? It's only 12 chapters into the story, right? There's so much to come, but at this moment, in verse one when YHWH calls Abram, Abram doesn't have any idea about the content of the promise. He has no assurance. He's invited and asked by God, who shows up and says, "I need you to leave your land." Unlike him, we have the benefit of getting to know more of the story, but he doesn't. We're the people who are the children and the heirs of the promise, but he doesn't know us. I mean, as he looks up at the stars later in Genesis 15, he's not like "Oh, that star will be Sara in Minnesota in the 21st century."

Why am I highlighting this? Because I want us to consider that it means that we are likewise called to be a people who live in this part of the story, not knowing the rest

⁴ See: Genesis 16. I preached on this. See: Sara Wilhelm Garbers, "On Being a Bad Neighbor," Colonial Church (November 24, 2019), access online: <https://sarawg.com/2019/11/24/beingbadneighbors/>.



of what will come, as a people who are invited to follow YHWH even though we don't know how the story will end or if the promise will look the way we think the promise ought to look. For the point of the life of faith is to let ourselves be encountered by God on the journey and to be transformed in the following. We are invited to be a people of promise who live our lives saying yes to the call of YHWH even though we don't know the rest of the story. This is what it means to be a people of promise.

The second thing that I want to highlight about Genesis 12 is that this blessing, the promise that God shows up and names to Abram, it isn't just for him. It isn't just for Sarai. No, indeed the promise is for *everyone*. This is where even with our Blessing Initiative, the reason it was thus named was on account of our desire to be a people who live out of the overflow of grace in our lives who, as we ourselves have known the goodness of what it means to journey with God, we live with our hands open in generosity because we know none of this was ever ours to control anyway. We are blessed; we know what it means is to be a people who are changed, transformed, and know the goodness of walking with God in the garden...and we then are to live from the overflow of that knowing. That is our invitation: to live from the place where we have known God's showing up in our lives. That is the promise, a promise that is for all the people as we ourselves live and know that promise for ourselves.

You know, sometimes I think that we as people -- I know for me at least -- we can be very much like the folks here in the book of Genesis, where you have these stories of our lives and of what's going on in the world, and you can get so mired in your own story or time that you sometimes lose sight of the larger picture and forget what the promise was about, that we cannot remember and we forget when we're wandering around that we were intended and we are meant to walk in the garden.

And so as we are seeking to be the church, to be a people who live our lives connected to the God of the whole of all of the stories, we want to be a people of promise, a people who remind each other that God isn't done with any of us yet, and that this blessing, that the goodness of a life lived without the trappings of ego and self-protection and all of these things is ours. Through the promise, we're invited into freedom, to walk with God and one another as we were intended to and to be people who generously extend that promise and invitation and good news, as we live it with one another and with the world.

So my question for us today is: if you were going to put yourself in a *Jeff* 12, or a *Suzanne* 12, or *Jessica* 12, or a *Sara* 12 moment (not to be sacrilegious or anything) like what Abram is experiencing here in Genesis 12, what is God calling to you? What might God be saying to you now? What might God be saying to us? What does it mean for us to be a people who live this promise, to be the church, to live in such a way as to invite people and to invite ourselves to walk with God in the garden?



Sometimes this looks like the beautiful opportunity to play tag with a bunch of lovely kids with masks on, having just eaten and feeling sick to your stomach, running around in shoes that definitely aren't designed to keep your 30 year older than the kids body able to chase them around a parking lot. Sometimes living this promise just means taking a breath and remembering to look up at the stars, acknowledging that the God of all creation is the God who knows all of these stars, and that each of us, and all of human history has been part of that promise. We're invited to live that together.

Can we be people of that promise? Will you join me in living the promise?

The promise is the truth that is for you, and so might we live that promise, that we indeed might be a blessing, a place of life for all of the nations.

Let us be a people of promise, dear friends.

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Will you pray with me?

God, we're not always sure where we're going, and sometimes when you show up and invite us, we're afraid because we don't know the rest of the story. God, I pray on this day that you would meet each of us and call out our names with the invitation to follow you; that we indeed might be a people of promise, that we might be the church living in the midst of your story, inviting people home to the garden.

God, we love you. We know ourselves as ones who are part of the beautiful sky that you have created full of wonderful stars. Breathe on us, O Christ, that we might be the church. It's in your name that we pray.

Amen.

God First

Judges 5:1-13

¹ Then Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang on that day, saying:

*² "When locks are long in Israel,
when the people offer themselves willingly—
bless the Lord!*

*³ "Hear, O kings; give ear, O princes;
to the Lord I will sing,
I will make melody to the Lord, the God of Israel.*

*⁴ "Lord, when you went out from Seir,
when you marched from the region of Edom,
the earth trembled,
and the heavens poured,
the clouds indeed poured water.*

*⁵ The mountains quaked before the Lord, the One of Sinai,
before the Lord, the God of Israel.*

*⁶ "In the days of Shamgar son of Anath,
in the days of Jael, caravans ceased
and travelers kept to the byways.*

*⁷ The peasantry prospered in Israel,
they grew fat on plunder,
because you arose, Deborah,
arose as a mother in Israel.*

*⁸ When new gods were chosen,
then war was in the gates.
Was shield or spear to be seen
among forty thousand in Israel?*

*⁹ My heart goes out to the commanders of Israel
who offered themselves willingly among the people.
Bless the Lord.*

*¹⁰ "Tell of it, you who ride on white donkeys,
you who sit on rich carpets
and you who walk by the way.*

*¹¹ To the sound of musicians at the watering places,
there they repeat the triumphs of the Lord,
the triumphs of his peasantry in Israel.*

"Then down to the gates marched the people of the Lord.

*¹² "Awake, awake, Deborah!
Awake, awake, utter a song!
Arise, Barak, lead away your captives,
O son of Abinoam.*

***13** Then down marched the remnant of the noble;
the people of the Lord marched down for him against the mighty.*

- Judges 5:1-13

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As we move into a time of reflection on the passage that you just heard, would you pray with me?

YHWH God, we give you thanks this morning for so many things, for the lives that we lead, for the breath that we breathe. God, we give you thanks that you have been at work in the midst of people's stories, stories just like ours, since the beginning of time. So God, by your Spirit, might you grant us faith and hope and courage enough to move more deeply into this story and find you, that we might be changed and transformed. And that we might indeed be the church. Meet us, oh, Christ. It's in your name we pray.

Amen.

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Well, good morning! It's really good to be with you this morning. Today, since the book of Judges, which is a little bit more of a story, I thought we'd join together here in the Meetinghouse for the story time, also known as preaching.¹

This fall, we're going through a sermon series exploring what it means for us to "Be the Church." As we were talking about what we wanted to bring ourselves and our whole community into through the series, we thought, "Let's move more deeply into God's story as it's told in the Bible, and thereby, through that encounter, to find ourselves and the story of our lives and the story of this time, so that we can wrestle together with what does it mean to be the church now." Indeed, what does it mean to be God's people, people shaped by these stories, formed by the Spirit, transformed by the love of God in Christ?

Over these last few weeks, we've begun to move into the text. We started off with, "In the beginning..." from Genesis, and then last week Jeff Lindsay brought us into the book of Exodus, as we've explored what it means to be a people of the promise, what it means to be a covenant people, a people who are brought into freedom and then invited to live a particular way of life.

Since we're not doing a 66-week sermon series (which is how long it would take us if we were going to hit all the books of the Protestant Bible), we're going to skip over a few of the books. So to date we've breezed through Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus,

¹ I gave this sermon while sitting down in the meetinghouse, like it was a story.

Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua...to get to our book for today: Judges. What's happened so far in these stories is, after Genesis, which is the story of this really nomadic people who are encountered by YHWH God, they begin to move into the land of promise but then there's famine and by the end of Genesis they are enslaved in Egypt. Then, as Jeff talked about, in the book of Exodus, that's where YHWH hears their cries of a people who've been enslaved for 400 years to bring them out of slavery, into freedom, into a land of promise.

And so in Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, the people are traveling to the promised land, trying to get to the place of freedom, trying to figure out what it means to be a people who live freedom. And then, at the very end of those first five books, known as the Torah or the Pentateuch, their main leader, Moses, dies. And they are about to move into the land. And right before the book of Judges, in the book of Joshua, Joshua becomes their new leader, the person who brings them into the land. And if you've read the book of Joshua you know it's a triumphant a story of them moving into the land and conquering it...everything's great and wonderful and amazing and also complicated, of course.

And then we come to the book of Judges. The book of Judges tells us a little bit more about the people as they're seeking to figure out what it means to follow YHWH, to be a covenant people, meaning a people bound themselves to this God, not to any other king, but only to YHWH. They are asking questions such as: what does that mean for how we live in the land and how we understand ourselves? That's why I asked the question to the kids during the children's sermon: who's your favorite superhero, because Judges is very much a story of the heroes of the people of Israel as they move into the land.

So, how about you? Who is your favorite superhero?

Now, I know even if you're 80, there's still some kid left in you, and maybe sometimes you wish you could be a superhero, too. So who is yours? Maybe it was as a kid, you wanted to be Superman or Batman. Maybe some of you really liked Cat Woman. She's not technically a superhero, but she does have a cool costume, right?

In so many ways, the book of Judges is a story of heroes. For this community, these leaders, these judges, they function as heroes for the people as they try to make sense of who they are and are called to be. Originally, these tales of the judges would have been tales told around campfires, taught to children, "Hey, kids, sit around. Let me tell you the tale of Deborah." Or they would be shared with the young emerging leaders of the community, as they would get together and talk about Gideon and what happened with his son, when really things didn't go well.

Communities have always had these kinds of stories: the stories of their heroes, the stories of people who saved them. Hero stories form us. They invite us to believe in worlds that are beyond that which we're experiencing now. I know for me, that's so much of what I love about Wonder Woman. The sense of the lasso of truth will

prevail. I mean, sometimes, some days, I really just wish I could wrangle people with the lasso of truth and they would have to tell me (and all of us) the truth. Namely, I think that frequently about politicians. Am I right?

Heroes tell us about who we are and who we long to be in the world. And similarly, these judges were important for the community as they sought to make sense of their world and themselves. Now, though these stories existed in the oral culture of this community as they moved from being a nomad clan in Genesis to an enslaved people in Egypt to being a free people who have arranged themselves very much like a modern-day chieftain system, according to the 12 tribes. They've now moved into the land but there are other people in this land, too, and the people of Israel are trying to figure out how to live in the land as a people following YHWH. They are wrestling with what it means to become a people whose first and most central command was to love God. "You shall have no other gods before me," is the first commandment that Moses brings down to the people from Mt. Sanai. And here in the book of Judges, they are wrestling with, what does that look like and does that mean for us to fulfill the command in our lives as we live in the land?

Over time, these oral traditions ended up being collected and gathered and written down to become what we know in Hebrew as this book that's named Judges. This book is about "the ones who judge," it is the story of the ones who judge. Many commentators believe that the form of this manuscript as we have it now was constructed and compiled when the people were in exile in Babylon, thus serving as a way for the people to make sense of their captivity.

So if we fast forward from the time that the Judges rule, the people are in the land originally as a loosely organized chieftain system, and over time they move into a unified nation, ruled by kings. Over time the north and the south split and then other geo-political forces come into play and first the Northern Kingdom and later the Southern Kingdom are overrun by the Babylonian empire. And you see in Judges, a pattern to the stories of the ones who judge, which are believed to aid the people in exile as they make sense of what God is up to and where is God in their midst while they are in captivity.

And so the stories follow a very similar pattern: 1) As the people of God who are supposed to be covenanted to God first, they turn away from God. They don't do what God asked of them to do in the land. 2) As they go their own way, they're overtaken over by some other outside forces who oppress them. Their freedom is erased, and according to the text, it's a punishment for their turning away from Yahweh. 3) They then cry out to God to rescue them. 4) Then YHWH, as YHWH always does, responds to the people, rises up a judge from amongst them, who rescues them. 5) For a period of time there is peace and the people live as YHWH intends for them, where God is again the center. 6) And then, as people are wont to do, they forget, and so the cycle begins again.

And so if you take this book and start to read it ... I will say, this is one of those times

where I picked this to preach on and then I was like, "Really? Why did I pick this text!?" Because there's a lot of violence in Judges which makes it really hard to read. But if you start reading it you will notice that in the intro there is an accounting (that differs from Joshua) of what happens as the people move into the land. This runs from chapter 1 through 2:5. If you have your Bible, you can skim along with me. Then there's a second introduction, a little bit more theological in nature, wrestling with what is happening when the people break the covenant that they have made with YHWH. This runs from 2:6 through 3:6. Then the major portion of the book is filled with the accounts of the stories of the heroes, the judges. There are six major judges and seven minor judges...thirteen in all. Their stories are recounted through chapter 16.

Now, when I was growing up, I only knew one of the stories from Judges: Samson. He's the really strong guy with really long hair. He was married to Delilah, and she was like real, real bad. Moral of the story, ladies: don't be a Delilah. Well, spoiler alert, but Delilah like tricks Samson, shaves his head (which is his secret superpower), and then the Philistines, they capture him and put him in chains. And then Samson is placed under like pillars, maybe like the ones here in the Meetinghouse, except for maybe closer because if he were in the Meetinghouse he would be Inspector Gadget length arms. Well, his hair grows back, and he cries out to YHWH. And of course, YHWH restores him and his superpowers, and then Samson, boom! He pushes down the pillars, the building collapses and the Philistines die, and Samson dies a sacrificial hero's death...so yay! That's the only one I know from when I was a kid. If you grew up in church, did you learn the stories of the judges when you were a kid? If so, which one(s)? What were the lessons you were taught about them? Think about that for a minute and reflect on how that shaped you.

For me, I only learned this one and from it I internalized that women were tricksters and untrustworthy. I've heard sermons to beware of the sexual prowess and seductive powers of women. Clearly, godly men were at risk. Thus, I felt a lot of shame and wished I could be godly like Samson.

But there are actually 13 different stories in this book about these different judges who play out the pattern of the people: forgetting about YHWH, sinning and turning away from YHWH, crying out to YHWH. A new judge is appointed to bring them back into right relationship with YHWH. I'll come back to this in a minute.

Then, at the end of the book, from chapter 17 through 21, the story gets really, really dark. It's really painful. Many people think that the reason for this is that the book of Judges is actually trying to argue for the role and the necessity of having a monarchy in Israel. This is argued for because, as it says at the end of the book of Judges, over and again: "In those days, Israel had no king. Everyone did as they saw fit."

So many scholars will argue, that the inclusion of 17-21 in the written text is because the editors was making the case for the monarchy. That by telling the failing of the

judges and the devolving situation in the land as it descends into anarchy people would think, "Hey, we should really get a king because if you don't get a king, it's real, real bad." But I think if we take a step back, if we want to "Be the Church" and root ourselves in the story of God and God's people, we want to come to texts like these to look for where God is at in this text. And one of the central truths that we see throughout the Bible is that at the very core of all things is always supposed to be YHWH, YHWH first.

Our relationship with God is supposed to shape who we are, and so that the call and the cry at the end of Judges, I'd argue, is best understood not as an apology for a monarchy, for a king here on earth to save us (even if that's what the editors intended and what some people in Israel desired), NO—for what God has always wanted is not for kings to save us, but for us to look and to turn and to remember that our call to be the people of promise is to live in covenant faithfulness, and relationship with God. And that the real problem is what happens when we look to heroes and kings and princes and politicians to save us, and we forget that central and always for every one of our stories is supposed to be the call to follow the ways of God.

God first. God at the center of all things.

And at its core, I think Judges is a book that reminds us that when we forget that YHWH is at the center, things go real bad. When we forget we slaughter each other. When we forget, we think we need to be the superheroes, like our superheroes in our movies do, right? They kill a lot of people and are flawed. But that's not what God is inviting us to! To follow YHWH and to be a people of promise is to know the freedom of the land that was intended for all of us.

To be the church is to put YHWH first.

Today you heard part of the story of one of these Judges. It's the story I didn't know when I was a kid and maybe you have or maybe you haven't heard it before. It's the story of Deborah. Deborah, in chapter four and chapter five, is one of the major six judges who rules in the land. As she comes into power, which is unusual even back then, just like it would be today for a woman to have such power. Of all of the judges, only one of them is a woman who is named. We're told that she's actually a woman of fire, and she judges as people come to her to ask her to figure out disputes between the people, and also she's a leader in the community. There's also a military ruler, Barak, and he is called by God to help to free the people. But when Deborah tells him this Barak is basically like, "Hey, yeah, that's nice that you like think YHWH told you that and everything, but I'm a little afraid about it."

And so Deborah says, "Okay. Be afraid. I'll go with you. And by the way, you'll help, but God's going to actually deliver the people through the hands of another woman, a woman named Jael." In this story, the people are indeed delivered. Jael helps to free them. God shows up. And in chapter five, we have parts of what the

commentators think is one of the most ancient poems in the whole of the biblical text. We have that in our culture too... think about that old rhyme about Paul Revere. You know it: "One if by land, two if by sea, and I on the opposite shore shall be." This poem functioned for Israel like the tale of Paul Revere's ride does: poems and songs have always functioned within communities to help us remember the stories of our heroes and victories, and in chapter five, this song, this poem is a poem in which Deborah, with Barak at her side, are calling out and reminding the people of the faithfulness of YHWH. They're singing the song and cry of freedom to inspire the people remember that at the center of all things is supposed to be YHWH.

This story invites us, at its core, to come back to seeking to as a people who put YHWH first, who put God at the center of our lives. Judges calls us not to live as if there is no king, as if there were no God who is the God of all of us, but to live under the reign of the ONE TRUE LORD and KING, to turn our whole selves and our lives back to the God who is the God of the promise for all of us.

That's why one of the things I love about our Bible and the part of the canon that we won't go to next is Ruth. The beginning of the book of Ruth starts off by saying, "In the time when the judges ruled," and then proceeds to tell a beautiful, completely different story from the horrors of what is happening in the book of Judges. And likewise, we, as a people, have the opportunity to, with our lives, tell a story not about a people who live as if there is no king, nor to be a people who look for kings or presidents to save us, but to be a people who live in *hesed* faithfulness with YHWH. Do you remember when I preached about this last spring? The book of Ruth is employed in the Jewish community during Shavuot as a testament to the faithfulness of YHWH and of the faithfulness of YHWH's servants, Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz.²

In the time of Judges, another world is possible.

We, too, are called to be a people who, no matter what is happening in our land, no matter the kings or the judges, are a people who live in faithfulness and in response to YHWH. We don't have to be superheroes who crush our enemies and vanquish empires in order to defeat the rule of evil in our world. No! That's never how the gospel works, right?

To "Be the Church," to be the people who follow YHWH has always been something a little less like superhero power and more like Spirit. This is why I love when we get to II Timothy 3 it says, "All scripture is God-breathed and useful to teach and instruct us." Because in that way, I think these stories in Judges become an invitation for us to look for the breath of God, to look for the Spirit bubbling up in the midst of the

² See: Sara Wilhelm Garbers, "Grace Actually Makes Us Bold," Sermon Preached at Colonial Church (May 3, 2020): <https://sarawg.com/2020/05/03/graceactuallybold/>. Also, Sara Wilhelm Garbers, "Grace Actually Restores," Sermon preached at Colonial Church (May 10, 2020): <https://sarawg.com/2020/05/10/gracerestores/>.

stories of people who are doing their best at times and sometimes just really go astray.

Might we be a people who look for that Spirit, who quest after God, who seek to live in view of the reality that it's not about the superheroes or kings or politicians who we think will save us, but always about YHWH. And might we then align ourselves with God's good story, a story of promise and faithfulness and love. Might we sit around campfires and dining room tables, telling our children, our emerging adults, and ourselves not stories of great superheroes, but stories of love, stories of the person who shared the food they had with the poor, stories of the stranger who was welcomed in, stories of grace like we ourselves have known, stories in which God is first, and God is center.

Might we be a church and be *the* church as a people who live not as if there was no king and just do whatever, but live as a people who re-root and realign and recommit ourselves to living stories of grace and of love and of peace. For indeed, there is one Lord and one king and one ruler and creator of all of us. He is not Caesar. Our one true LORD and King is the Prince of Peace, and his story is a story of love.

So let us live that story. Let us put God first. Let us be the church.

Amen.

Can I Get a Witness?

Acts 4:1-22

"While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees came to them, much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead. So they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. But many of those who heard the Word believed, and they numbered about 5,000. The next day, their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family. When they had made the prisoners in their midst, they inquired, 'By what power or by what name did you do this?'

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, 'Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders. It has become the cornerstone. There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.' Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus. When they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to say in opposition. So they ordered them to leave the council while they discussed the matter with one another.

They said, 'What will we do with them? For it is obvious to all who live in Jerusalem that a notable sign has been done through them, we cannot deny it. But to keep it from spreading further among the people, let us warn them to speak no more to anyone in this name.' So they called them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them, 'Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge. For we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.' After threatening them again, they let them go, finding no way to punish them because of the people, for all of them praised God for what had happened. For the man on whom this sign of healing had been performed was more than 40 years old." Acts 4:1-22

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Good morning, welcome to worship this morning. What a week it has been! No matter who you are, whatever your political persuasions, I know that this week has been emotional and fraught for all of us. This morning we come to church for the reasons that people throughout history have gathered: to be encouraged, to be

reminded, to be encountered, to be challenged and to be re-grounded in the faith that sustains us.

So today as we continue our series on what it means for us to “Be the Church,” let us take a breath and welcome the Spirit who is with us even this morn. Will you pray with me?

God of all life, on this morn, as this gathered people, might we indeed hear the echoes and reverberations of your good news, of your prophetic calling, and of your life-transforming work...that changes not only us, but it changes our community, it changes our nations, and it changes our world. Spirit, might you breathe.

Meet us this morning in the language with which we need to hear You.

For it's in the name of Christ that we gather.

Amen.

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Many of you know that music is an important part of my life. I was reflecting recently on why this is. I thought back to summers that I spent at my dad's house while I was growing up (my parents separated right before I turned four). Up until I was in high school, I would spend about a month with my dad each summer. And between voracious reading of books, I would sit next to the stereo and listen to music, CD after CD because my dad has always been one of those early adapters of technology, memorizing lyrics, wondering about different worlds that were possible. I suppose in a way, this nostalgia and the wonder of music I learned from those early days continues with me until today.

So when I come to this text in the book of Acts, chapter 4 ... and the sermon title that I chose for today is “Can I Get a Witness?”, given my locatedness and my own history, I was brought back to an experience of being in probably about fourth grade at my dad's house, listening to a new album from an artist named Enya. The song was entitled “How Can I Keep From Singing?”

Some of you know or can call to mind that song. Others of you are thinking, “That's the song you went to? You didn't go to Marvin Gaye's ‘Can I Get a Witness?’” Well, as I told you, I was born in the '80s and I'm a white woman, so—as it turns out—I didn't have Marvin Gaye on my CD rotation in the '90s. The lyrics of the song that did first come to my mind though, they speak about the cry of a heart. “How can I keep from singing?” And that refrain is echoed throughout the history of the Black Church in the United States as well in this call, “Can I get a witness?” It's that call, that sense of after the preacher preaches, and ask, “Can I get a witness?” It's a call for a testimony, a story about the ways indeed that the gospel has changed real people. And this text in the book of Acts that we just read is no less about the bearing witness of a group

of people who were encountered by the Spirit and were transformed...and couldn't keep from singing. Let's revisit the text a little bit together.

As we've been going through the books of the Bible, seeking to understand what it means for us to be the Church, we thought it was important for us to pause here in Acts. Now, some of you know this book and some of you don't. Acts follows after the four gospels. So the gospels are accounting the good news of Jesus from different perspectives. Acts then is the moment after Jesus has left, when the people are given the Spirit and a new thing is born in their midst as this community is changed and transformed by the work that Jesus had done. And it was a revolution.

Beginning in Acts chapter 2, we read that the people have gathered and it was folks from all over the world at that time. The Spirit comes and they begin to speak in their languages, filled with the Spirit so that everyone understood. This is the grounding and the beginning of the story of the Church! It's a story where every single person from every tribe and people, which we might today from every race and every nation and every ethnicity and every gender, they heard the good news and they proclaimed it in their own language!

I want to start here because I think that sometimes when we think about the gospel, we know the language and the ways in which we have heard it ourselves. We proclaim it then in that same language. But the thing is: all of us don't speak the same language. I mean, let's break it down. How many of you are in relationships with people who are 1,000% just like you? I mean, I'm not. Sometimes I speak in languages that are my languages. Andy, my lovely spouse, values languages like being on time ... (Sorry, babe!) I, however, value languages like being really present, and so I'm left frequently looking at my phone and exclaiming, "Oops, shoot, I'm late!"

I speak in a different language than you perhaps, but this doesn't need to be a bad thing.

We live in a world right now, and as we've been experiencing in our own political climate, where at times we think that the fact that we have learned different languages means that other languages are completely invalid, but this doesn't need to be the case.

Because what happens here in the book of Acts is that suddenly the doors get blown open and everyone gets to hear the language that is their tongue they were birthed into. You know what that feels like when God has met you in the language that you speak, in the language that you live in, right?

But just because that is the language that you have saturated yourself in, *it doesn't mean that their languages aren't true*. One of the things I've always loved about Jeff is he's always been generous to me here. I am this punk, 30-something who becomes a part of this wonderful community just about almost three years ago in January. He

and I are super different and sometimes he's like, "Really? What? What are you even talking about?" But he gets curious, and he asks me questions. I remember early in my time being in the community, he said to me, "Hey Sara, I noticed you always call Andy your spouse. Why is that?" And I had the opportunity to share with him what it means for me to use the language of spouse.

To name my relationship with Andy as that of "my spouse," is to counter the legacy and norms of the kind of relationships that I grew up bearing witness to where being a wife in my community meant you didn't matter as much. Our relationship is based on equality, and the word "spouse" better captures that we don't live by traditional gender roles. By naming Andy my "spouse" it also allows a more expansive place for all people to have themselves and their relationships, their love, recognized. After I explained all of this to him, Jeff thought about it for a second and was like, "Hmm, that's interesting."

Or another example from early in the life of my being here in the community, one of ya'all ... I don't know who it is because Jeff's good like that, said, "I like that new minister, but could she just get that thing out of her nose." And Jeff replied, "Sometimes you got to let the young people do what they're going to do." Because even though sometimes, because of our generational differences, because of our backgrounds, because of our stories, we speak and we hear different languages, it's still good news.

It seems to me that as we think about Being the Church and part of the beauty and the power of what happened here in Acts that continues to happen up to this day, is that God speaks in languages that all of us can hear. We don't have to always understand each other's languages, but can we hold space for the languages that each other are speaking? We do this while also challenging and wrestling with each other because it no matter what language it should always be good news, for the gospel should always be good news no matter what language. It isn't good news if someone else's language just gets excised. This good news needs to be good news for everybody, for every person, for every language, for every tongue. And sometimes at first it doesn't feel like good news, especially if you've been used to thinking that your language is the only one that really counts. I mean, think about all the people who went to Jerusalem from around the Roman Empire...they had to either have translators or figure out how to understand the language of Aramaic that was being spoken in Jerusalem.

And perhaps, maybe for some of the folks who had spoken Aramaic their whole lives to suddenly hear these languages from the far outer reaches of the Roman Empire, they thought, "What? Are you kidding me? Those people must be drunk." I'm referencing Acts chapter 2, in case you've forgotten. That was a charge levied against them, that they maybe were drunk to which Peter replies, "Come on, it's only 9:00 in the morning." That's one of the first things we learned about Acts, is that when the Spirit comes, the Spirit speaks in languages so that all of us can understand. This good news then is good news for all of us! So part of our invitation

then is to sit in that space where we might not always understand the language, but we honor the reality that the good news has indeed been spoken through our siblings who are new in this faith. We are all part of one body and one movement of the God of all love.

I know that's hard in our times, but if we could just take a breath ... which is another word for spirit, *ruach*, I think we get to tap into that invitation and that space for us to Be the Church to honor others even as they speak languages we don't understand, and to seek to listen for how the Spirit might be bringing good news, even if it looks different than we thought.

As we continue forward then through chapter two into chapter three, God continues to add to their number. The community is growing, they're sharing with one another. But here's the thing: the Roman Empire isn't super into it. These new Christians are a threat both to the established religion of their time, but they're also a threat to the Roman Empire...at least that's what the empire thinks. Because here they are telling about this King who is not Caesar, but this King is Jesus. A king who came riding on a donkey, proclaiming good news and a Kingdom that didn't look familiar.

Some of you will remember, from last Palm Sunday when I talked about Zacchaeus being called down from the tree. And you know that there were people who were like, "What? He's not supposed to be included in the good news here." But the way that Jesus brings about revolution is that he speaks the good news through every language for each of us to understand. And then it's a language which includes the cacophony of wonder that is each of us, that each part and each voice might be equally honored. This, in its way, is actually incredibly dangerous to the Empire because it breaks apart the divisions in their world and in ours. It opens up the possibility that the things we think are Republican or Democrat, that those are important things for us wrestle with yes, BUT we wrestle with that as a people who remember that we aren't the enemy. No. We are a people who, whatever we think, whatever languages we speak, we are called to cultivate space for every tribe and tongue, for every race and person...in their own body to be able to both hear and proclaim and live the good news that is spoken in their language.

And so, we come to chapter four. What happens is some folks don't like what's going on very much and they get angry. So, the temple guard and the Sadducees, they come up to the apostles who are addressing the crowd and who are talking about the resurrection from the dead and Jesus, which again, wasn't totally cool with him either. And then what happens is the leaders are trying to get them basically to be quiet. They're like, "What are we going to do with these folks? Here they are, they're talking about this Jesus and they're proclaiming that He is Lord, there's no salvation except for under Him. What are they even talking about?" And they were so self-assured, it tells us in verse 13, because even they were uneducated and of no social standing, they were people who had been with Jesus. I love that! They were self-assured because they had been with Jesus. What does it mean for us to also be a

people who are rooted in, because we ourselves have walked and journeyed with Jesus?

As the passage continues, folks keep trying to get them to be quiet and they're threatening to throw them into jail. And Peter and John, they answer in verse 19, "Judge for yourselves whether it's right in God's sight for us to obey you rather than God." And then verse 20 is what I based this sermon title off of, "Surely, we cannot help speaking of what we have heard and seen."

Can I get a witness?

This is the call and the invitation to bear witness, to tell one another in our own language about the ways in which God has shown up and changed and transformed us. This is where the earliest Church starts and begins: when the Spirit comes, the breath comes and changes and transforms them so that they hear the good news in their own language and then they honor that each of them are speaking different languages and different tongues, and they create space within their community for each of them so that they gather together, and they share everything that they have, and they make sure that everyone is cared for.

They live in a way that truly does turn the world upside down. And every time this earliest Church thinks that the grace of God in Christ doesn't quite go that far, the Spirit shows up again and invites and challenges them to live this good news in a way that bears witness.

This is one of the elements that I love in thinking about the Spirit's showing up in their community and the call that we have as a people to be born again. This is not something that just happens one time, "I was born again and that's it." Because there's no more story then! No, the call to be born again is to be born again, and again, and again, and again. To be born anew so that we live as a people, not of flesh or of ego, but as a people of Spirit.

A people who hear God's speaking in languages we don't understand and we know it's still good news. And we create space for one another, just as we ourselves have space that has been extended to us to join the table and find ourselves as the beloved ones of God.

This is part of what I love about our core value of Welcome Beloved. It's a sense not just that, "Yeah, you can hang out here." No, it's supposed to be a call for us to love, that each of us are seeing, that each of us are heard. And that we hold that space and recognize that even though sometimes it's hard and it's challenging, the grace and the love of the Spirit continues to expand the invitation. This call to bear witness, "Can I get a witness?" is the invitation to each of us to actually name the good news that we ourselves have lived and have experienced. Indeed, how can we keep from singing?

For me, this encounter and this good news began when I first heard that God was love. This love of God in Christ, it saved my life in so many ways. It kept me grounded, and no matter what happened throughout my childhood. And this has continued to be the call and the invitation of my life. And yes, it's been upended and looks different than it did when I was a kid. Yes, I wrestle with, and sometimes I don't want to be a part of it...yet love remains and it continues to call me even this day to be born anew and to continue to discover that the work of the Spirit and the bearing of witness is a lifelong journey and a lifelong testimony for each of us. The call for us to be the Church then, is a call for us to be a people who move in rhythm with this God who speaks in the language of each of us. It is a call to create space...even when we don't necessarily understand each other's languages. It invites and challenges us to be sure that what we're living and preaching and holding to is truly good news for everyone. To Be the Church is to be a people who are continually encountered on the roads of our lives by Jesus that we might see even more fully and clearly than we did yesterday.

To Be the Church is to be a people who, in the midst of whatever empire, whatever is going on, we are a people who live stories of goodness and grace...that is for all of us. The church in Acts functions inside of the world and its time just like we do. And might we be a people who similarly are so sure about the call and the invitation for us to follow Christ, that it becomes a space of transformation for us as we live in the world. So, in the midst of this election season, in the midst of our time and our political climate, might we remember that the call to Be the Church is one that calls us, as we learn from Acts, to be a people who move in concert with God's Spirit, listening the beauty of this cacophony and chorus, as we each speak and bear witness to the good news that we each know in our own skins. And might we then be a people who from this place where we cannot but help to bear witness, also actually bear witness to one another's stories that we might honor them.

And just like this early church in Acts, Being the Church might mean that some of the ways we show up are counter to the norms and the assumptions of our culture and our political time. For indeed throughout this book, if you read it, they get thrown into jail and all sorts of stuff happens, but God keeps showing up and the gospel of grace keeps being heard in more and more languages...and it's a gospel of life. This has been present throughout history going back to Acts up until this time, people have written notes, and told the stories, and born witness just like Martin Luther King did from the Birmingham jail, just like Peter and Paul do in acts, just like we ourselves are called to do.

Might we give witness.

Can I get a witness?

Might we bear witness.

And might the Spirit blow and speak in all of the languages, through all of our stories.
And might all of our encounters with this God of love truly change us that we might
then Be the Church and be a people who love God with all that we are, and then
truly love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

Might we be a people who bring about *this* Kingdom, where there is room at the
table for everyone.

Spirit blow.

Spirit breathe.

Speak the languages we need to hear.

And then, my friends, let's bear witness. For how then can we keep but from singing?

Amen.

**Please note: In speaking of unmasking the stigmas surrounding mental illness, when I reference “taking off our masks”, I am referring to the invitation to remove the socially acceptable, cleaned-up versions of ourselves that we put on in order to prevent our struggles from being seen. As it relates to actual masks designed to protect us and our neighbors from the spread of COVID-19, please keep yours on and continue to Mask up, Minnesota.*

.....

*You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.*

An excerpt from “Wild Geese,” by Mary Oliver.

December 4, 2020 was a crisp winter day, warmed by a knowing sun. Together, Jordan Tommerdahls’ parents (Kay and Stu), family (including sister Sarah with Ty and Owen, brothers Javonte and Paul along with Kelly and Summer, Colton, and Larkyn, Grandma Sandy and others), along with his girlfriend Taylor, the Island Guys, and so many dear friends all gathered at his graveside to bury his body. Placed appropriately right on the edge of the woods and wetland, I found myself turning to the woods and the trees and sky during his graveside ceremony. As I listened to the wind, I heard Jordan’s laughter, and when a flock of wild geese rose into flight... tears gathered in my eyes as I smiled to myself and whispered: “fly free dear brother,” while I spoke Mary Oliver’s words to Jordan and the geese with whom his spirit was dancing and flying.

I suppose this is why in anticipation of today, I found myself returning to the words of poet Mary Oliver in “Wild Geese,” for in many ways Mary and Jordan are and were kindred spirits. Lovers of nature and life, with the ability to see the beauty and simplicity in the wonder of all living things; people who knew what it was to live without pretense, without masks, and without socks to prevent one from feeling the ground beneath one’s feet. People who have inspired us to live alive and to love with reckless abandon.

And in truth, it is because of these memories and the connection between Mary and Jordan that I began with Mary’s words from “Wild Geese”... *“You do not have to be good, you do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting. You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.”* But it is also because I think this poem speaks to all of us gathered tonight to speak of mental illness on this “Night to Shine.” For as the poem continues: *“Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.”*

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Tonight I ask that you consider the invitation: that mental health and the struggle to stay upright in a world that is so often designed to take us out— this is not something that is blighted upon some of us...no, this struggle and despair, and pain is something that all of our stories reveal.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

On a lot of levels, I get why we have cultural stigmas—they are part of our very human condition. We struggle to make sense of illness, and so often we have been tutored to fear our own suffering and struggle and illness and pain. But if we are going to reduce the stigma about mental illness, it requires of us a necessary journey to admitting that there is no us (the healthy ones) and them (the sick). No, the human condition of shallow breathing, mind wrecked by grief and trauma, reaching for wholeness and longing for love to save us...this is the human condition. This is *our* condition.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

For when we can't turn with love and compassion to the wounds our own bodies bear witness to, when we cannot speak of the despair we each hold, we then scapegoat others, externalizing the pain that we don't know how to tend to in ourselves. Let me give a very present-day example of what I mean by this: When I consider our wildly divergent responses to COVID-19 I am struck by how the reality that much of our refusal to admit its horror, to grieve the losses of our daily rhythms and holiday routines is because so many of us are barely holding on. We, like addicts in need of the next hit of activity, white knuckle our lives in terror of what the silence and the pain might do to us. As if our refusal to turn toward the truth makes it any less real. And yet, we humans are wired to do this as our way to survive.

Hear me, I don't say this to shame any of us...I mean, I'm human too and I do the same things. I have good reasons why my personality is larger than life, I have reasons why I am always busy and achieving...my denial and overperformance is tied to the pain and grief I carry in my story; it's about my own deep longing to be seen and belong. It's my running away as fast as I can from the demons who tell me I am not and will never be enough.

So tonight, as we seek to unmask the stigmas surrounding mental illness, I want to echo Mary Oliver's words- "*You do not have to be good, you do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting. You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves. Tell me about despair, yours and I will tell you mine.*" For the invitation to unmask the stigmas about mental health is the call of love to each of us to take off our own masks and share our despair one with another...to let the soft animals of our bodies love what they love. To cease walking for hundreds of miles through the desert on our knees, repenting.

For as we do this, as we name our despair, as we risk the terror of letting love and see and heal us, we are opened to love and can drop the need to stigmatize the overflow of struggle which is manifest in those of us who are most struggling. And in so doing, by caring for our own pain, we can then move toward one another in love for we know that there is no "other," there is no "us" and "them", there is just us... one community of all of us beautifully frail and wonderful humans who are broken and yet held and healed and cared for in and by love.

As the poem continues...

*Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.*

Meanwhile, we are called to drop our own masks, to come out from behind them, and to foster safe and supportive spaces where others can do likewise. For mental illness, as I said at Jordan's funeral, is just like any other illness. Think of cancer- to hear the word itself causes fear, and yet we know that some kinds of cancer are more livable than others- "Stage 2 melanoma" is far different to hear than "Stage 4 pancreas cancer."

So let me be clear: mental illness, like any other kind of illness, isn't anyone's fault. Some of us here in this virtual room will get and/or are living right now with mental health illness of one form or another due to trauma, grief, pain, or other wirings of our brain...and through medication, therapy, and other supports we are and will be able to live and flourish even when and as we struggle...even as sometimes the illness is so deep just like stage four pancreas cancer that people die from their illness as did our dear brother Jordan.

And if we want to reduce the stigma, we both need to admit that we each struggle as we hold grief and despair in our stories—for we reduce stigma by coming out from behind our masks—and we also reduce the stigma against mental illness by normalizing mental health as a category of illness like the others we have learned and are likewise learning to embrace...

For mental health has nothing to do with categories of sin, selfishness, or morality. None of us blame people for health conditions that they cannot help, right? Not a one of us would dare blame a person for dying from cancer, right? Right. Likewise, to end the stigma about mental health asks us to see mental illness as just another category of health that can and often does affect any one of us. And our response to this illness, just like any others ought to be to love, to support, to make casseroles and buy grub hub certificates, and to advocate so that our health care system can have the resources it needs to show up and care for mental illness just as it does for heart issues, broken bones, or cancers. Mary, again invites:

*Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.*

Meanwhile, here we are, a gathered people. Do you know what— in a world that is torn apart by political divisions and riven through with the rage of undealt with trauma and grief, we are a people who have chosen to show up, to love, and to say, "We believe in and hope for a world of the possible. A world in which stigma doesn't have to be the only fact of our world. A world where the helpers and the lovers and the friends and the community remembers... remembers that we are the hope and the possibility of another way of being human. A world where we refuse the categories of us and them. A world in which neighbors show up for one another. A

world in which medicine is for our healing.” And I want to pause to name this and to honor you,

my friends...for this (gesture to gathered group) THIS is how the change comes, this is how stigmas end, this is how healing comes. It comes through people who have said, “No!” to the status quo and instead say, “Yes!” to the dreams of possible things. Your showing up tonight is an act of loving resistance and in so doing you carry on Jordan’s legacy: To be a people who invite everyone in. To be a people who believe in smiles and joy and that there are no enemies, only those who don’t yet know they are friends. To come tonight is to say that you affirm that love is a healing balm and the most powerful force in the world.

Your presence affirms a belief that at the end of all things, that as we face the pain and struggle and the despair, we take up the call not to be good or to put on masks to insulate ourselves by pretending we’re fine, just fine... but to refuse the idea that we need a scapegoat because we are too afraid to turn towards our own pain, but it is a remember to return to the edge of the field and to enter the wild, to come the woods and wetland with curiosity and abandon, and to fly high on the wings of the wild geese, to come home again to one another and to ourselves. To take off our masks and socks and to come together so we might build another world where the masks melt away and we can all live love, unafraid.

This to me is the truth of Jordan’s death and the call of his life. This is the night to shine our lights: to take the masks off, to take off our socks and walk barefooted into the woods alive and to fly...together as a part of this one family, supporting one another and remembering (Mary, once again):

*Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.*

Might we give generously tonight, remembering we are all a part of this beautiful world together. To love and to care without masks of ego protection. Meet me on the edge of the woods and let us fly together and create a world that cares for all of us. Thank you for your presence, your generosity, and most of all...thanks for believing that together we will create a world with love enough for us all. With gratitude to Jordan and to Mary- may you fly freely, we’ve got you. Together we will end the stigma about mental health; Together we will shine the light; Together we will build a safe home for all of us.

Andy and I decorated for Christmas just *a bit* early this year (Nov 14th). Ok, so it was SUPER early, but we had good reason! As Andy noted: “It’s COVID-land and I need some joy!” I agreed and for weeks now our house has been warm and bright.

Oh, I so want all of the magic of the season! I want carols, Christmas tree lights, and the glow of a fire that warms our hearts. I want Christmas Eve where we sing “Silent Night” and share light with one another as we remind each other that this is the night our Savior is born.

But this year my longings hold in view of COVID, and so I turn to the wise man in his rainbow coat because I want to be reminded that beauty and hope is still breaking forth in our world. And I invite you to consider with me this man of old, who searched far for the light of the world, and come with what gifts you *do* have. Deck your halls or zoom room. Look for the star and hang that strand of lights. Wear your rainbow robe or ugly Christmas sweater. And remember – remember even as you grieve. Remember that the advent of the light in our world didn’t come in the form of fireworks, but through a vulnerable baby. For *this* is how the light comes: it comes in the bleak midwinter, on the longest night, and in the midst of our deepest pain and fears.

The light still comes. The rainbow will punctuate the rain-soaked sky. Hope is alive. Beauty is ours. Love will win.

So deck the halls, and light your candles, dear friends.

Mary

In her book, *Inspired*, Rachel Held Evans wrote that if pay attention to the women in the midst of Israel’s conquest stories you will see a more complex (and human story). She noted: “Their stories invite the reader to consider the human cost of violence and patriarchy, and in that sense prove instructive to all who wish to work for a better world.”

In the midst of violence and pain, women in the Bible often point to forgotten pathways of wisdom and freedom. Like Ruth and Naomi in the time of Judges, so too Mary presents a powerful counter to the way that one would expect God to enter the world. And therein is an invitation to all of us to remember...that the way God comes in Jesus isn’t through power or by might, but in humility and vulnerability.

This message of life can also be scary. I have spent a lifetime ensuring I will not be vulnerable or weak. I have built up defenses and accomplishments enough to prove that I am worthy of God’s and your love. But in our sister Mary, I am—and we are— invited to remember that God’s love and power is birthed through our liminality. As II Corinthians 4 reminds us: “We have these treasures in earthen vessels to remind us that the power is from God and not from us.”

So where are you feeling vulnerable? Where is your grief? Where is your pain? Where is your fear? Bring them to the manger so that we might discover a new way to live as ones who, like Mary, birth the kingdom of Emmanuel in our world.



“The Law Is Love”

Luke 10:25-28

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law. What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer. Do this and you will live.”

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As we continue in worship, will you pray with me? God of all love, on this morning (or whenever we're watching), we come as a people looking for the light. People in need of the light. People longing that it would still come. And so come, oh come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel. For we are all a people in need of your love. Be with us oh Christ. Amen.

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Having grown up in the western metro of the Twin Cities, I had heard about this church since I was a kid. One of the things that I knew about all of you (and now me too), is that you were a people who wrestled. A people who brought your hearts and minds and whole lives to the living and embodiment of your faith. Not a people who were all of one thought, not a people who agreed about everything, a people who gathered not because of creed, but because of a belief in the transformative power of Jesus Christ.

And you sought to be a people who lived that law of love in your personal lives, in Edina, in the Twin Cities, and in the world. Now, much of that I respected...but truthfully, some of it made me a little nervous. You see, I grew up in a tradition inside of Christianity that taught me that there was one way to understand things...and to think that you could have a bunch of people who came together to worship Jesus and they might think different things. I mean, goodness sakes (and now I sound like my grandma!!)

But this has always been true of our community: we wrestle together as we gather. We bring our whole lives, our hearts, our minds, and ourselves to discern together the ways that God's law of love invites us.

That's been a marker of this community.

And it's why as I come to the sermon today to talk about the third candle that we light during advent, which is love, that I want to invite us to reconsider love's invitation, not as a binary, but as a wholistic call to live the way of love and the gospel of peace, of



shalom.

This shalom is meant for our inner well-beings, for our personal relationships, but also a shalom that seeks to order and reorder the entirety of all human civilization. And that is where we gather this time during advent, looking for and awaiting the arrival, the coming of Emmanuel God with us, who brings in his coming a kingdom, not of this world, but one that is rooted in the God of all love and all life. So let's look for the light together.

One of the aspects of the tradition inside of Christianity that I think this community has embodied is that sense of holding together tensions. We say that. It's one of our core values. "Wrestle with the tensions." Now I know that sometimes some of us want to be like, "Tap out. Can I take a break?" That's totally fine. You can always do that. But then we come back and we re-encounter one another and the God who wrestles with us.

In the earliest 20th century, 21st century actually, Reinhold Niebuhr, Christian ethicist and theologian of whom I have spoken before, was writing to a world that was divided in some similar ways to ours. There was a lot of tension inside of the church, inside of culture, about who were we going to be? What did it mean to be a faithful people?

There was a revolution happening in ways of understanding. Science and Darwinism had risen to the fore as a way of considering and understanding the ordering of the world and the universe. And there was a divide deep within the Christian church in the United States particularly. It was a controversy where some went one direction and some went the other...and into this fray moved Reinhold Niebuhr, wanting to invite the church to not just split, but to re-remember their calling to be a people who followed YHWH God, a people who seek to embody "the perfectionist ethic of love" (to quote him, not myself). And so, as we gather to look for and await that coming of Christ, we gather as a people seeking that kingdom and that love. So no matter what you hear today, if you notice any discomfort in what I'm inviting us into, I would invite you to consider how is our formation, which 98% of it happens outside of church, how is this shaping how you hear me and how you hear the Gospel's invitation. I say this because it's especially important in our time that we wrestle with and reflect upon how what we hear and how we hear each other shaped by the culture and time in which we live. Not to jettison it, but to be aware of it so we can revisit God's story and God's invitation again and challenge each other to wrestle so that we might more fully embrace and follow the call to be a people who follow Jesus.

Reinhold Niebuhr's invitation was that in a world where on one hand, some members of the church had chosen an ethic of love, which became very personal, very privatized and that salvation was only for me. And another portion of the church that said the only way to live the gospel is through justice, that he wanted to bring those things together. Not just because Reinhold Niebuhr had a few thoughts about unity, but because Reinhold Niebuhr believed that that the call of the gospel lived in the



tension. He believed that the law of love to which the gospel spoke was something that held together love and justice. That love was always an inward transformation, which invites us to live outwardly and that the outward life shapes us inwardly.

For our faith is not just something that happens this direction (between God and us), but happens this direction (between us) and inside of us as well. And so today, as we consider that the law is love, I want to invite us again to come to that candlelight and to seek out a love that invites all of us, the whole of us. For indeed, this is good news for our whole world.

In the passage that Bruce read for us this morning from Luke chapter 10, a lawyer trying to test Jesus. He is trying to paint him in a corner a little bit and be like, "Okay." Because if Jesus gets this wrong, we all can be like, "Next. Write off that guy. He's a heretic." What if he says the wrong thing? And when tested to say, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus, of course, puts the question back to him, which is such a great tactic that I wish I employed more. Jesus says back to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" And the lawyer answered and says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind and love your neighbor as yourself." And Jesus replies to him, "You've given the right answer. Do this and you will live."

Some of you have heard how my spouse, who went to seminary when he turned in his final paper, he put a post-it note on the very front of his paper in which he had to defend his statement of faith. And he said, "Listen, it all can be summarized in this. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself." Of course in so many ways, he was right.

That most fundamentally, the call that we have as a Christian people is to be a people of love. That's it. God is love. They will know we're Christians by we're love. Jesus says here, and it's repeated again in two other gospels that all of the law and the prophets is summarized and summed up in this. Love the Lord your God, with all that you are and love your neighbor as yourself.

Of course other things are important, but that's the thing. That's it actually. The call of Christian love and the embodiment of Emmanuel God with us is the reminder that the only law and the beginning and end of all things is love. Of course, living this out, figuring out what it means and actually doing the work of love is a lifetime of learning and unlearning of trial and error, of mistakes and possibilities.

But this is where today I want to bring us is deeper into this invitation. And the way that the law of love has always been multi-directional. It's a call that invites us to live out a way of being in communion with the God of the universe, that then changes and transforms us from the inside out that we live in that love and from that overflow, we



live love with one another.

Love of course, is both a profound moving space for us in our personal relationships. To live love can be a beautiful thing. It's also one of the most vulnerable things that we can ever do. It asks us to risk, to show up, to admit when we're wrong and to be open to the possibility of it. But in this call to love our neighbors and in the biblical witness that we read throughout scripture, the call of love is not a call of sentimentality.

The call here in the New Testament to agape love isn't a theory. It's love with skin on. This is part of the profound message of the Christian heritage of good news is that God is not far off or removed, but God has taken on human skin and knows what it is to be amongst us, knows suffering and pain and longing, knows risk and vulnerability, knows what it is to not be loved. To love is something that asks us likewise to put skin on and to live. To live love. And to live love for our neighbors isn't something, again that's sentimental or abstract. It's something that takes into account the particularity of their circumstance and the moment in which we live. This is where we see the connection between agape love and what Jesus is referencing here in the gospel writers in talking about these texts that would have been central and important for the Hebrew people.

Here in the greatest commandment, two different texts are referenced. One is from Leviticus, from Leviticus 19, the call to love your neighbor as yourself. This appears in Leviticus in a section related to the way that justice and the ordering of communal life happened and transpired. And the second is the Shema, referenced first in Deuteronomy 6, the call to love your God who is one.

This call of a love that goes this direction (between us and God) and this direction (between us) and within us is one that I would argue expresses itself as both love and justice for another biblical way for understanding living love is the living the call of justice. To quote brother Cornell West, "Justice is what love looks like in public." This connection—of love and justice as being opposite sides of the same coin—is what we proclaim each year at Christmas through the Christmas carols we sing: that the embodiment of love brings peace and justice for all.

We sing about how on these silent nights and holy nights, we look for peace, peace in the biblical sense. Going way back to the earliest texts of our faith is a vision of shalom (peace). This is vision of rightness, both within us, but also discovered in the right ordering of community. And we see that this vision persists throughout the Hebrew Bible. One of my favorite passages and sections is from Isaiah, which we return to during Christmas, for Jesus himself identifies as the suffering servant from Isaiah.

The book of Isaiah itself opens with a challenge and an invitation to God's people who they have forgotten the ways of God, calling them to walk in the ways of God, inviting them to learn anew. The prophet calls them cleanse themselves, to get injustice out of God's sights, to cease to do evil and learn to do good, to search for justice and help the oppressed. To protect the orphan and plead the case of those who are widowed.



YHWH demands that the people choose the pathway, and should they choose as he commands, he notes that though your sins are like scarlet, they can be as white as snow. And though they are red as crimson, they can be like white like fleece. The Hebrew word here for the seeking of justice is *mishpat*.

Mishpat is way of understanding justice as the doing of justice, of according to people the rights they are due as God's people, as children made in God's image. Throughout the book of Isaiah, two conceptions of justice are wedded together: *mishpat* and *tzedek*. While *mishpat* is a sense of a justice that is the rightness of life together and also the sense that each is due certain rights or obligations as part of the community. This is then put together with *tzedek*, a conception of justice, which is sometimes thought of as the plumb line. It's the through line, the way that we are rendered just, justified, sometimes translated into English as "being rendered righteous."

It's another way of understanding this dual conception that if love looks like both the relationship between us within ourselves and a relationship to God, that love and justice are also opposite sides of the same coin. The ways that we who know what love looks like we work for that with our neighbors. This is then a justice that is both us justified in our relationship to God (*tzedek*), but that calls us to live a justice (*mishpat*) in the way that we live and order our lives one with another.

Christian ethicist, Nicholas Wolterstorff, notes that what's happened is that in the Christian tradition is that we've thought that wrath and justice is the domain Old Testament, the Hebrew God, who's angry and wrathful. And so we think of love in the New Testament as divorced from that. And yet, if we look at the witness of Jesus, the way he inaugurates his mission here on earth and what is said of him and what he is referencing, he's talking about this God who is the same throughout all of the witness of God, journeying with God's people. This means that love and justice are held together through out the Bible and that we can't understand one without the other.

In this way, love is something that is both personal, but it's also that invitation to how we live and how we show up. Love and justice go together. Love towards God and love for neighbor go together. This is the kind of love we long for! And this is the tension we seek to hold that as God's people looking for the light that still comes, the savior God, Emmanuel God with us, we want to be a people who hold together these tensions, where we think of love as the profound encounter and experience of knowing ourselves, beheld in the gaze of Jesus, Emmanuel God with us. And that that love changes and transforms us, for as we are seen, we then extend that sight and recognition so that we work to ensure that for all of our neighbors that that same experience of a love that honors them is possible, which is justice.

How many of you know that I'm a little obsessed with my spouse, Andy Garbers? One of the reasons I say that I married him is because he always saw me. He always heard me. And in a world and in a community where I grew up that women didn't matter as much as men, to have a man see me meant so much. And I knew it was love.



He's always seen me and not been threatened. And that's what I mean when I'm talking about this candle of love. It's the light of love that warms our hearts so that we remember that we don't have to live according to the laws of this world. No, we live according to the law of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And that love is one thing. It is a love that is embodied between us and realized as the doing of justice.

The law is love. That is why, as I shared in the children's sermon, my favorite Christmas carol is "O Holy Night," for it names what the light of love brings to us and our world. In high school every year my choir director, Chad Junker, who some of you know, had us all sing that song and together, we would perform the lyrics in sign language.

Together we would sing and sign:

"God's law is love and his gospel is peace.

Chains shall God break for the slave is our brother, (is one of us).

And in God's name, all oppression shall cease."

Therefore, sweet hymns of joy and grateful chorus raise we. Let all within us, praise God's holy name. For Christ is our Lord.

May we all worship and adore. And may we live and share a light with one another and with this whole world that is the light of love.

May the love of Christ be yours and may it transform us that we might be God's church now and evermore. Amen.

John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word; the Word was in God's presence, and the Word was God.

The Word was present to God from the beginning. Through the Word all things came into being and apart from the Word nothing came into being that has come into being.

In the Word was life, and that life was humanity's light—a Light that shines in the darkness, a Light that the darkness has never overtaken.

Then came one named John, sent as an envoy from God, who came as a witness to testify about the Light, so that through this testimony everyone might believe. He himself wasn't the Light; he only came to testify about the Light—the true Light that illumines all humankind.

The Word was coming into the world—was in the world—and though the world was made through the Word, the world didn't recognize it.

Though the Word came to its own realm, the Word's own people didn't accept it. Yet any who did accept the Word, who believed in that Name, were empowered to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor urge of flesh nor human will—but born of God.

And the Word became flesh and stayed for a little while among us; we saw the Word's glory—The favor and position a parent gives an only child—filled with grace, filled with truth.

-John 1:1-14

"A rose by any other name would smell as sweet," said Juliet (as penned by the great bard).

The Bible is often called "The Word of God." Doing so sometimes obscures that its power is discovered not in its name but in its reference.

"In the beginning was the WORD and the WORD was with God and the WORD was God."

The Word is not a name, nor is it text...as if text could capture it! The Word of Life is being, is essence...it is embodiment. 841

The Word, who was from the beginning, is the one who was not born of power or of patriarchy, but of Spirit.

The Word, who is the light of life, that we discover in the Word who became and becomes flesh—human—just like one of us.

The Word, who stays with us for a while.

The Word, for whom we long. The light of which we are in need and of whom we await...is Jesus.

And *this* Word, by any other name, is still the light and bringer of life.

So we, together with the Shakespearean lad Romeo, likewise take up new names and proclaim: "Call me but love and I will new be baptized."

Might we too be known not by our names but by the sweet light of our love, which the Word animates.

Let us pray together.

Oh Word of light and life, we your faithful and faithful-intending have come. We come longing for the long-expected one. We have heard the angels and mountains proclaim, we have sung of glory, we have beheld the stable. And now, might our lives likewise proclaim a joy for all of the world, a word of life that is for all of the people. Might we be evidence of the wonders of your great love, the wonders of your love. Come, oh Word of light and life, and make bright with joy our hearts and homes and world.

Amen.



Gathered at the Table

I Corinthians 11:17-34

Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What? Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you.

For, I received from the Lord what I also handed to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill and some had died. But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation. About the other things I will give instructions when I come.

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

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Will you pray with me? God, as this gathered community, we come to your table to remember and to be transformed. So by your spirit, meet us in this gathered space and in this gathered medium that we might be your church. Be with us now and open us to you, oh God. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

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The first play that I was able to attend when I was a kid was at the children's theater. It was a play based on a book that some of you may know, called *The Little Match Girl*. It's the story of an impoverished girl who sells matches. One night she happens upon one of those brilliantly beautiful homes that has the candles flickering in the window. When I saw that play, and when I read that story, I imagined myself as that little girl looking in the window in the homes where I imagined the happy families lived, the places where at Christmas the candle lights flickers. Which is why, of course, now in my house as an adult, we have those candles, no matter what Andy Garbers thinks about them.

But I imagine myself there. I so longed to have that kind of a family where everyone would gather at the table and come together at the holidays, where it didn't matter because you knew each other's stuff and each other's stories. You would laugh, and you would tell stories, and you would eat food. And grandma and grandpa and any friend and anyone was always welcome. Now, of course, as an adult, I also realize that most of our tables are a little more complicated. And yet, part of both the beauty and then also the pain of the table is that the table itself is supposed to be that place, that place where, like as I said to the children's sermon, you get to pull up a chair and you know it's yours, and you know you belong, that this is your family, these are your people.

That's why as Congregationalists one of the central gathering places we come to, well for a lot of other reasons of which I will talk more about in a minute, we come to this table. This very table in this space is a place of remembrance, both of the work of God and what God has done through Christ on our behalf in providing and laying out a table for us. But it's also remembrance that when we come to this space we come as a people who gather. You'll notice even the arrangement of furniture here, right? There's two chairs, one for each place, and there's two benches. But right now there's an open side. Why? Because it's for all of us to gather around this table as one body and one community gathered in the spirit, gathered at the table.

Part of the pain of our lives even now is when the church isn't that space. Because that's what it means to gather at the table, whether it is the table of our families, the table of our churches, it's the place where we gather to eat and be nourished in every single way. And then that everyone else may gather as well to have food for their bodies and souls, to gather at the table. Now, food and the gathering at the table around bread and wine has long been something inside of the tradition of our faith, going way back to the Book of Exodus. In Exodus 12:1-28, we encounter the people of Israel at a particular moment in their lives where they are still enslaved in Egypt. They've called out to God. God has risen up a leader, not unlike Martin Luther King Jr., who's come to help the people get over that mountain to the promised land.

But at this very moment, they don't yet know the sweetness of that land flowing with milk and honey. They only know 400 years of slavery. God raises up Moses. Moses comes alongside with Aaron and then Miriam and goes to the Pharaoh and says, "Let



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my people go." Which, of course, the Pharaoh is like, "Sure, see you later." It doesn't exactly go like that, it's a little bit harder. At this very moment what happens is that the people are instructed that they are to take a lamb that is sacrificed and paint over their doorposts with the blood of that lamb, indeed the Passover, that their young sons will be able to continue to live and that they will indeed be moved to freedom. But they're also instructed at this moment that they are to prepare unleavened bread and that this unleavened bread is the piece of the table that they get to take with them even though they will now be sojourning for 40 years in the desert. They're not going to have tables that looked familiar, and they're going to long for them. They're going to want to be back at the table. They're going to want to be off of Zoom and gathered around tables in their homes, right? Right.

But at that moment, those kind of tables aren't going to be possible. And so God, who is indeed their bread of life, is the one who says, "I will not only spare you from death. I will not only pass over you and bring you into freedom, I will also be the bread of life that nourishes and sustains your beings and your souls, that you might get over that mountain top to the land of promise. And in that land, lest you forget," as we are reminded in Leviticus 23 amongst other passages, "you are then to begin each year in the remembrance that I, the Lord your God am Yahweh, the one who has rescued you from slavery, brought you into the promised land, and you will gather at the table. And you will remember that it is I, God, who have brought you home."

This is a table where there is enough for all of us. There is life, and there is remembrance that the fundamental, sustaining element of all of life and food and everything we drink is Yahweh; it's God. And so, each year up until today, Jewish people celebrate this feast, this festival known as Passover. It is this very thing then that Jesus in Matthew 26: 17-30 then gathers with His disciples to celebrate. They're Jewish. They're there to celebrate and to remember the works of Yahweh on their behalf to pass over and to bring them into the land through this festival.

As Jesus gathers with them that night, He takes that same bread and wine that Jewish people throughout history had taken to celebrate and remember, and he says, "A new day has come. This is the new covenant. A covenant, again, of freedom. A covenant, again, of life. A covenant, again, that you can carry with you to nourish and feed your souls no matter how chaotic the world might be. This is the new covenant of my body and my blood. Every time you gather at the table, remember that and remember me." For it is that remembrance that fundamentally changes the way we live and who we are as a people who gather at tables every day of our lives. And so yes, once a month in this very space, we gather for that body and that blood, that we remember that it is Jesus Christ who nourishes and sustains us and makes the table possible.

But then we also carry with us that body and that blood and that remembrance into every single table, whether it is a virtual table, an outdoor gathering with masks on,



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or one with our beloved pods that we get to enjoy right now. We carry that body and blood and that remembrance to the table. And the table of Jesus Christ then becomes the table of our breakfasts, our lunches, and our dinners, where we pause and remember, remember first that it is Yahweh, the one who has spared us and brings us to freedom. It is Yahweh who is the bread of life that we carry with us. We pull up a chair, and we sink in and settle ourselves, and we tell the stories, one to another, stories about our days, stories about our hopes, our dreams, our pain. In this remembrance, God is present with us.

But sometimes we also forget. Our lives get busy and hurried. We make frozen pizza one too many times in a week. Guilty. We forget that we ourselves are welcome at the table. We don't bring our full selves. We try to sit in chairs that were never meant for us. Sometimes we just really want to overturn the table because we don't want to sit with one another anymore. And yet God's spirit shows up and continues to invite and remind and challenge us, as is happening here in 1 Corinthians 11, to remember what the table is for. For here in the early church, the people had indeed likewise forgotten. And though they didn't have frozen pizza, they lived in a world that not unlike ours was also divided, divided by social class and hierarchies, divided by identities, divided in all the ways humans have always figured out how to divide ourselves one from another.

They brought that same knowing, that same way of remembering to the table. Where here as they gathered it seems that what would happen at that time in the Greco-Roman world is you would have the host of the gathering and then their friends, those of the most class affiliated with them, they would be seated right one with another. The best wine would go to them, the best food. But at that same table, there were others who were hungry. In this early church, they had forgotten that Yahweh had called them not to remember the ways of old or the ways of their world, but the ways Yahweh. The ways of God in Jesus Christ as we gather at that table in the new covenant is supposed to be a place where there is nourishment equally for all of our beings and our souls. Here, Paul is calling and crying to the church at Corinth to remember, to remember who they are called to be, to remember the God who has saved them.

He challenges them, and he invites them. This, indeed, this passage from 1 Corinthians 11 is the same passage that every Sunday when I am doing communion I google again to remember because I'm terrible at numbers, and I can never remember it's in chapter 11. It's that same passage that we don't often start with the beginning of it, right? We don't often begin by saying, "Now, these instructions I have to... There's some divisions..." We don't start there. We start a little bit later with the words of Jesus in that remembrance. But today, as we talk about being a congregational community and gathering at the table, I wanted us to start in verse 17, to remember that even us today, like them, we sometimes forget. We forget what the table invites to each and every single one of us and that it is a place where no one is to go hungry, no one is to just get drunk on wine while others do not have



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enough. But it is a place where we as members of this body, as ones who have the blood of Christ that has saved and flourishes and flows through and in us, we gather at this table. We gather, and we are tutored and disciplined into a new family and a new way of being.

But this table isn't just for Sundays. This is the table of our lives. Friends, we are a part of a family of God. At this table, there is a chair for each of us. And there is a chair for everyone. We are called and invited to walk into the light of the candles of the spirit which illuminates all of the stuff of our lives. We are called then to share that and to love and to grieve and to pray and to hope and to remember this Jesus. Sometimes coming to the table can be scary and hard. Sometimes we don't want to gather with one another. And yet Jesus, who sits at the head of the table, calls lovingly to each of us. "Remember, I have a seat for you. There is no one excluded, no one uninvited. There is a place for you here."

Shirley Chisholm was the first woman and African American to run for president in the United States. One of her frequently quoted statements that she said was, "If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair." But here's the thing, as the church, our table isn't just a place where people have to bring their folding chairs. Our table is the place where we have chairs ready, where we say, "No, here, let me make a place at the table for you, for you are welcome here just as I am and I have been." It's a table of grace. It's a table of life. This is why as we will sing in a few minutes the song Amazing Grace. It's a grace that brings us all to the table, that brings us home again, even if we have been far off and forlorn.

One of the things I love about this hymn is not only how most all of us know it. When you sing it, do you feel it in your bones? Because I do. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found. I was blind but now I see." These words were penned by John Newton. John Newton had been a slave trader. And John Newton had an encounter with God, and it opened up his eyes, so much so that by 1788 he wrote a pamphlet Thoughts on the Slave Trade that became important for William Wilberforce in the abolitionist movement and in England and throughout the world.

This is the encounter that we have at the table. It's a place where we are welcomed home even when we forgot. Even when we forget one another, we are invited through partaking of the body of Christ to live as that body, and to be a people then who extend this table one to another and to this whole world. Right now, in our time, the table is a hard place. Not only because it's not something we get to do very much with one another, but because right now, it's also hard to gather at the table with those where we're not seeing one another and the violence we feel in our hearts against one another. It is my prayer that we as the church would be a people who interrupt the narrative like Paul was doing here with the church in Corinth and say, "Stop it. This is not what the table is for. The table of God is the table for everyone. Remember Christ, remember what he gave us, and live that remembrance."



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That is the table. That is the table where thereby we, the people who know ourselves at home, around that beautifully gathered table throw open the doors and look outside to the little match girl. And we say to her, "Come on in. Welcome home, beloved. There is a seat at this table for you. And yes, I see your grime. I know you feel unworthy. But I've got scars too." And there together at this table, our wounds and our scars are held by the God of all love in Christ. And once again, the blood spares us and brings us to freedom. And once again, the bread, it nourishes our souls and it sustains us so that we can get over that mountain to that glorious promised land. May we gather at the table, and may we be a people of remembrance of this table of Christ, the body of Christ broken for you, the blood of Christ shed for you. Live now in remembrance of him. Amen.



Gathered for the Neighborhood

Ephesians 3:1-10, 14-21

"This is the reason that I, Paul, am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles. For surely, you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation. As I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ. In former generations, this mystery was not made known to humankind as it has now been revealed by his holy apostles and prophets by the spirit. That is the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body and sharers in the promise of Christ Jesus through the gospel. Of this gospel, I have become a servant according to the gift of God's grace, that was given me by the working of his power.

Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles, the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things. So that through the church, the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. For this reason, I bow my knees before the father, from whom every family in heaven and on Earth takes its name. I pray that according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth, and length, and height, and depth, and to know the love of Christ, that surpasses knowledge so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him, by the power at work within us, is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine. To him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever, amen."

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Well, Amen! Will you pray with me? God, whose love is beyond that which we could ever ask or imagine, may your power be at work with us and dwell within us that indeed this love and peace, which passes all understanding may be the air that we breathe. It's in Christ's name that we gather. Amen.

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The first movie I went to see as a kid was none other than one of the Disney princess stories, *The Little Mermaid*. Lost there under the sea with an octopus witch and a father with a big trident and a silly little crab, she longed to be part of the world above the waters, to find a Prince named Eric who would kiss her and everything would be transformed and changed. Well, I, as little Sara, left that theater weeping, uncontrollably weeping, because (spoiler alert, if you haven't seen the film yet, it was a long time ago so I'm not going to spare you here)...spoiler alert! At the end, she leaves her family and her world under the sea to go be part of this world where humans walk on land and dance. My family thought it was kind of funny. Like, "Why are you so distressed? This is a fairy tale." And I was like, "Don't you understand? She had to leave her whole family and she's never going to get to see them again!" That was little Sara. Kind of par for the course.

And yet, there was a truth of something in my own story for growing up, watching those Disney films, I, in so many ways, wanted some prince to come along and bring me to another land. Another place. Like Jane Eyre in the book that many of you know, I spent my childhood behind curtains, reading books, dreaming of worlds that were different than the world that I occupied, longing for another life. Now, many of you know me as a very extroverted person, but all I did my entire childhood was read and read and I got to dream of lands and landscapes that looked different than my own. It may be no surprise then that my favorite series as a young girl was Nancy Drew. I loved the Nancy Drew stories. Not only was there the excitement of unfolding a new mystery, but on the book covers Nancy always had a new outfit that looked really cool.

But additionally, in the stories Nancy was the hero. And every once in a while, a very lovely, attractive young man named Ned would come along to support her in her journey. And I held within my story, this inner tension: On one point, wanting to weep for the stories, which told us that little girls had to leave behind their worlds in order to find love and freedom. On the other hand, desiring to be a spy and the hero of my own life. Yet I didn't know how to carve out my own path and write my own story, longing for love and freedom and all of the things for which so many of us long for, but not sure what would be the plot line of my own life.

Fast forward to Sara in high school. A popular song at the time is the Dave Matthews Band song "Crash." I heard it on the radio as I was in line to do my deposit (because we didn't have mobile deposits then). And I heard the lines to the song once more because it was played again and again on the top 40 radio, the line: "In a boy's dream." I sat there, my 16 year old self, in my newly acquired \$1,200, 1987 Toyota Camry, pulled out my own deposit ticket and began furiously writing "Girl's Dream Too!" a song that was indeed not played on the top 40 radio hits, but it meant something to me. I didn't just want to be the plot line of someone else's story! I didn't just want to be rescued, but I wanted to know that my story mattered too. And this—these fits and spurts of my own growing up and coming of age is so much my own story.



I kissed frogs hoping they would turn into princes, liked guys that all my girlfriends thought—“What is wrong with her? He’s terrible!”

And the reason for this in so many ways was because at the center of my being was a terror that maybe I was unlovable. That maybe the story that my bones wanted to write was a story that was too far off what it should’ve been. And my fear and my shame and my longing made me look for other people’s stories. Thinking that maybe if just maybe I could be a better princess, then maybe one day a prince would come along who would see me. Maybe I could be Sleeping Beauty and Prince Phillip would find me all those years in the woods. But it kept not unfolding that way. And I kept crying at the end of the stories, being mad at the tales that told me of things that I didn’t actually want.

Until one day I woke up in a new way from my own sort of trance and desire for love and belonging. This happened because of God’s work in my life. I almost got engaged to a man that would have been a devastating, destructive relationship. It was in that moment when I realized that I was writing a story that wasn’t mine and was one that was actually harmful to me that I realized that maybe there were some parts of my own story that needed deeper healing than I realized. That began a journey for me, deeper in, deeper into my own story, deeper into asking what it meant that I had long claimed that I believed God was love and believe that Jesus came to save everybody. I just wasn’t so sure Jesus meant me.

That healing work, which of course began long before that shown in that young woman who cried at the end of *The Little Mermaid*, was the work that God continued and continues to this day and will continue until I’m quite sure that I die. It is the work that God wants to do in each of our lives. God has formed us all wonderfully in God’s image. And, as we have been talking about this January and February, our community who is gathered by Christ. And yet, sometimes in that gathering, as we gather by the Spirit, we gather at the table, we gather around the Word...but we leave parts of ourselves and our stories outside of the narrative of this big story of love and grace. We, of course, profess with our lips that Jesus has come to save us. And yet the truth is that we live our lives tightfisted, clenching onto lies that we’ve believed about our stories and who we are and who God thinks of us.

I believe each of us have parts of that truth, that fear, in our own stories—things that we learned that weren’t of God, but maybe we came to believe because of our parents who are doing the best that they could. But they’re human. Stories where we were told: “Little girls don’t do that.” “Little boys don’t do this.” “Oh, how could you possibly...” “Can’t you be more like your brother?” “Come on, get your stuff together!” And we live our lives and our stories, not according to the narrative of grace, but according to our lack (or perceived lack). Through all of this, I believe that God, by God’s Spirit and God’s deep love, continues to call to each of us. Not that God has every single plot line along our journey so set that we can’t possibly move or



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choose...It's not that.

It's that God has an overarching story and a through line for each of our tales. That each of our lives are supposed to make manifest the truth of God's goodness and love. That is our invitation. That is the freedom to which we are invited to pick up each of our pens --not to write anyone else's story, but the story of grace that God is wishing to write in our own lives. Of course, God doesn't make us live stories of grace. God's love is not that which constricts us or demands. God's love and God's story for us is something that God's Spirit invites us to choose again and again. Even though we lose the plot line sometimes, even though we insert other people's dreams and other people's longings and other people's stories. And in so many ways, the story of the Bible is just this kind of once upon a time. The story of a people who God has fashioned and loved, brought into freedom, meant to walk with God and one another in the garden at peace with all of creation.

And yet, as we know the story if you've read it at all, you know that the people lose the plot line. They forget that their story has always been meant for them to walk in this way of life, they forget that the story wasn't for warring between brothers. The story was supposed to be of peace and of goodness and of abundance of a land overflowing with milk and honey. And yet there are monsters in the land and we get afraid and we lose the plot line. The reality is that this is true of us as individuals, of us as a church, of us as a larger community, as the story of Christianity, we sometimes lose the plot line.

As we wrap up this series about what it means to be the gathered community, we began by talking about how we are gathered by Christ. And we end by saying, we are gathered for the neighborhood. This not only is the truth of Congregationalism and our call to be the church, but it is fundamentally the call to be Christian. As we have affirmed that we know in Scripture, the greatest commandments that Jesus issued is to love God with all we are and to love our neighbor as ourselves. We are gathered by Christ; we are gathered for the neighborhood. If we do not live gathered by Christ, loving God, then we are not Christian. But also if we live gathered by Christ, but we lose the plot line and we forget that we are gathered for the neighborhood, we have forgotten that these things always go together, because the story and the through line of God's work is always love. It's always Shalom. It's always healing.

Sometimes though in our turn to God and being gathered by Christ, we forget that we are supposed to be gathered for the neighborhood. Inside of psychology, there are many writings about how sometimes Christianity in different spiritual faith traditions are that which we employ as terror management or another term, spiritual bypassing. This is where, as each of us is looking for and longing for that solidarity, knowing our stories count, knowing we are seen, knowing that we are going to be rescued and loved which we are in Christ, that instead of letting that permeate and really saturate so that that is the truth of our stories where we know that we are a



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people who are fully baptized in love. We are seen by Christ, but then sometimes we keep parts back. It's totally normal, super human. We get afraid. We think grace can't possibly go that far. And so we hold parts of ourselves off from God's vision so we think because as we know, God actually still says, but leave those parts over here. And when we do that, we lose the through line.

We engage in faith in a way that allows us to manage our terror about our shame instead of allowing the light to heal us. We engage with our faith such that we don't have to deal with the hard things, because we're sure that they will kill us. And yet Jesus continues to knock at the door, asking us to be reborn and rebaptized more fully. This is why as we look at the story of Christianity, we realize it is not just one story. Although there is one story to which the church has been called, the reality of the church in history has been much more complex. There have always been people of deep faith who have sought to bring Jesus' healing and goodness, and gospel news to the entire world. And yet there are others who have employed that gospel for personal power. There were crusades that were genocidal.

While that is not of Jesus, it is what that people who've claimed the name Jesus have lived. They lost the plot line. Congregationalism -- if any of you have been a part of Christian's class -- you've been sitting in this story for awhile. The story of our own tradition is also multiple and many. In many ways, it has been the story of a people who said no. "We're going to listen to the Spirit. We believe in freedom of conscience and the priesthood of all believers and the King doesn't get to tell us who God is." These people sojourn to a new land. And yet we know part of that story, it also resulted in moments like the Salem Witch Trials, where there was fear and a desire for outward appearances to be of a particular kind, a control of women and women's bodies. They lost the plot line.

We know from the story in our own community, that there has been beauty in so many places. I think about my own experience of witnessing each of you show up to care for Daniel and Dawn in the midst of Dawn's diagnosis of stage four pancreas cancer. Many of you also bear the scars of human relationship, where there's been transition and pastoral leadership that has been painful and left wounds. We lose the plot line. We forget that this community is always gathered by Christ and gathered for the neighborhood, gathered to be about the spirit and the table and the word, all of these things of life. And yet the call of Christ remains to each of us as individuals, as a church, as a community, as Christians ourselves, to be a people indeed who live God's story of love, who embody the good news one to another.

And so here in Ephesians, Paul is writing to the church to tell them, don't forget the plot line. Remember what it is to which Christ has called you. Don't get stuck in stories that aren't your own. Remember the good news to which you were called. Remember the love that grounds you. Remember why I kneel before Abba God, from whom every family in heaven and on Earth takes its name. Remember the work that God is doing, the riches and glory. "And I pray that you will remember indeed," he



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says to them. "Remember so that you might know that Christ dwells in your hearts and you might live that way, grounded in love so that you can grasp the breadth, and length, and height and depth of Christ's love. That you can experience this, which passes all understanding and be filled to the fullness of God, whose power is at work within us." If only, if only we will remember the story and remember that it is good news for us.

It is good news as Jeff and I got to preach together on that Easter Sunday in 2019, when Dawn had just died. It is a story to pick up our pens and to write God's stories through our lives, through this community, to be a people who are not just the gathered community for no reason, but a gathered community who are gathered by Christ and gathered for the neighborhood. Might we indeed not lose this plot line. May we remind each other that this is our story, that this is our song. As I shared this summer, a quote from Martin Luther from his 1520 piece on Freedom of the Christian, he writes, "We conclude therefore that the Christian lives not in themselves, but in Christ and in their neighbor. Otherwise they are not Christian." We live in Christ and in our neighbor. That dual call to love is what makes us Christian. It changes our story, allows us to write narratives that are filled with freedom and love and grace. But here's the thing friends. We get to choose. Our life is one choice after another.

What will we write? What will be the legacy and the narrative? Will we remember the plot line? Will we remember who we are: our name and our colors and our foods and the things that make us, us, living in the beauty and the wonder of grace? As one of our denominational affiliations has as their saying, "God is still speaking..." God is not done with us yet. And as we are in the precipice of our 75th anniversary, the question before us is, what story will we write in this next chapter? What story will we join God as God is in the business of writing a story, as we pray every week that God's kingdom would come here on Earth as it is in heaven?

So today my first question for each of us is: what story are you living? Are there parts of your story, if you pause and are silent, where you would acknowledge you live as if they are beyond the pale of grace? And how then might grace invite you to quit writing anyone else's story, but instead to let God write a story of redemption and healing in your life?

In my own story, God has been doing a long healing work, of helping me to believe more than I ever have that God's love is for me, that I don't have to pretend to be someone else or hide behind curtains waiting for someone to save me because I already am saved by grace. And that grace allows me to write stories of love. I still mess up. I still lose the plot line, but it keeps calling me home and inviting me with courage to pick up my own pen, to face my own terror, because I know I'm held by the God whose story is all love.

So what about you? What story does God desire to write in and through you? And what about us? What is the story God wants to write and will write through us? May



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we remember this plot line. May healing come for the parts of our own story as a community where there are scars.

And may we, in that way live a story of grace, of a people who remind each other of the plot line, that the through line of everything is this God whose story is always actually one thing... and that story is love.

So God, whose power is now at work in us, can do measurably more than we ask or imagine. To God be glory, in and through this church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, world without end. Amen.

Let us be the church and let us be gathered for the neighborhood.



Turning to the Wilderness

Luke 4:1-12

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone.'"

Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, "To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'"

Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

-Luke 4:1-12

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As we continue in worship, will you pray with me? God, this Lenten season, might you meet each of us and turn our faces towards yours and remind us anew of your call and your love, that we might be your church. For it's in Christ's name we gather, Amen.

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Now I have to admit (in spite of all my bravado in the children's sermon) that I'm quite rather a curious outdoor enthusiast. You see, for as much as I love the outdoors, as much as I have dreams of through hiking trails, such as the Superior Hiking Trail, the Appalachian, the Pacific Coast Trail, and the North Country Trail, I am terrified of animals. All kinds of animals. I'm afraid of cats, yes, as in the felines some of you keep in your houses. I've even been terrified of dogs most of my life and it was only through employing behavioral techniques that I learned in therapy that I've been able to work through my unsubstantiated fear that dogs barking at me from behind their fences are conspiring to eat me.



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Sara, the great outdoor enthusiast...terrified of the wild!

And yet, this is just how it is. This fear took root a long time ago. When I was little, my parents divorced and I would visit my dad in Colorado. Some of my favorite memories of time spent with my dad are of camping in the mountains. In particular, I remember a time when we were in the Rocky Mountain National Park, camping with one of my dad's friends and his kids. The dads decided it would be fun to try and tease us kids. So my dad told me that the mountains were teeming with cougars... who liked to eat little girls who talk too much.

And I was just such a little girl.

I was quite sure I was going to get eaten and I didn't know what to do. I mean, to this day, in some inner recess of my mind I am quite sure that I'm at risk of being eaten by mountain lions...in St. Louis Park. It's true.

Fast forward to me in high school, I am going to be a sophomore in high school and am going to the Boundary Waters for my very first time. On the way north we stop at the ranger station where they show us a video designed to ensure that we practice bear safety. Guess who promptly became terrified of bears and refused to go to the bathroom at night, lest she would be eaten by one? Me.

This is my lived tension: I want to solo hike trails and yet I slings not one but two pans from my backpack, speaks inordinately loudly while hiking, entreating, "Please, mother bear, please don't think I'm here to get between you and your cubs." Of course, I'm overstating my terror a bit...but not really.

I love the wild, but it also terrifies me. It terrifies me because when I'm in it I am reminded of the grandeur of God and that I am not larger than any mountain. I am not larger than any mountain. And is precisely this that terrifies me. I've spent a lifetime ensuring my psychological and bodily safety, I seek control and mastery so as to not feel vulnerable. But there's nothing like the wild to expose how foolish a notion it is that we have control over most things.

I love the wild and it terrifies me.

And so this Lent we wanted to explore our invitation to turn toward the wild and the wilderness.

Not just because the wilderness, is something that we value in our community as is evidenced by the work done by those who labor in our gardens, caring for the watershed, and tending to the bees. Yes, we believe we are called to be stewards and participants in the wonder of God's creation, and we do this work because God is the God of the wild and the wilderness features prominently throughout the Bible. But we are also turning to the wild this Lent because the majority of Protestant faith traditions begin Lent with today's scripture -- the tale of how Jesus goes into the



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wilderness and for 40 days and 40 nights is tempted right before he begins his public ministry. It is to this scene and the invitation to turn our faces toward not only Jerusalem, but also toward the wilderness that we will be exploring today.

The wilderness is present at the beginning: In the beginning God's Spirit hovers over the chaos/the wild. And it is into this space that the breath of God speaks, forming life out of chaos, making possible new things. It is a wilderness to which God invites Abram, as Abram becomes the father of a new people; it is only on account of his willingness to leave behind the comforts he had known that he finds a new place. It is to the wilderness that Hagar flees and discovers the God who sees her (El Roi), the God who indeed makes her and her people a great nation. It is to the wilderness that the people of Israel go after they emerge from slavery...and for 40 years they journey through this wilderness until they reach the promised land.

It is to the wilderness that in Luke, as he accounts right before our passage for today, we discover John the Baptist, who has called the people to come out from the cities to be baptized...as Jesus is. The wilderness is indeed a place where God shows up and meets people. It is a place where the things that we had relied on before are stripped away and where new life is possible.

In a recent study of the book of Exodus that I did with Stephanie Spencer of 40 Orchards, she suggested that part of the reason that the people of Israel didn't go directly from Egypt to the Promised Land (because that journey shouldn't have taken them 40 years) was because they needed time to unlearn the 400 years of formation they'd endured as slaves...they needed time to imagine new possibilities for who God was calling them to be. Inside of neurological science and psychology we've discovered that our brains develop neurological pathways, well-trod roads of normative behavior and responses we have learned through our lives. Though our brains have profound capacity for neuroplasticity (the changing of our minds and making new pathways), it takes time to change the patterns and the pathways that we have grown accustomed to. Indeed, for me, the kid who was afraid of dogs, it took some time and deep breathing to not think little poodles were going to eat me... but now I know better. In fact, I'm now the proud parent of a double Doodle.

It takes time to help our brains and our bodies believe in other worlds and possibilities than those we have known. So imagine if you will, that for generations, your people have been enslaved in Egypt. The next day, you're supposed to just wake up and magically be like, "Nah, I'm going to go build a pyramid anymore, I guess might as well go worship YHWH and see what might happen." No, it's going to take some time to unlearn the ways that you had been formed and to become a new self. Thus, it is in the wilderness where God shows up and reminds them that God is the one who feeds them. God is the one who makes new life possible. And likewise, God changes us, if only we will go to the wilderness.

I know that in my own life, some of my most sacred and transformative experiences



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have been in the wild and in the wilderness, places where I have reached the edges of myself and of the places that I couldn't control. Here I discovered that there was more life and more possibility and more wonder to be had than that which I knew in the safety of my home.

Maybe there's a reason that there's so much wilderness in the Bible. Maybe God knows something about the wilderness and what it births in us.

This passage from Luke is repeated in all of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). Here in the book of Luke, it follows Jesus's baptism and is placed right before Jesus will begin his public ministry (paying attention to the placement and content of a passage as it differs between the books can be instructive about the authorial intent in each of the gospels). There are so many things that are significant about this passage: here Jesus is the new Israel, Jesus is the new Moses, the one who will lead the people into the promised land. Jesus, the one who was baptized into the new covenant, is made clear through the Lukan retelling to be the fulfillment of the Deuteronomistic history: he is the man who will lead the people into the new land. This Emmanuel, God-with-us, has come to bring liberation to a people who were enslaved as he fulfills the calling that YHWH had long had for the people of Israel. And so in these 40 days in the desert, symbolizing those 40 years that the people of Israel were formed and reformed, Jesus himself is formed and reformed, being tested again and again and shows himself faithful.

Satan presses him, "Hey, can't you make your bread from the stones?" And Jesus quotes Deuteronomy as he replies, "No, we know where bread comes from. We know where life comes from. It's from YHWH." Satan prods again, "Well, how about we'll get the nations to worship you." Again, Jesus references Deuteronomy, quoting the passage following the Shema, the reminder to love God with all you are and serve God only, as he responds, "No, this isn't about a power that you can give me where I will rule over the nations, for indeed we are called to be a people who worship and bend to God alone."

Satan tries again, "Well, why don't you throw yourself down from this temple so God can save you?" And Jesus responds with Deuteronomy 6:16, telling him, "No, I won't do this." And by so doing, Jesus not only is formed for his ministry that he will live and embody, but he shows himself to be a person who understands what it means to follow YHWH, what it means to embody and live as the faithful one. Who else should be the one to invite us into the promised land? Who else should we follow into the wildernesses of our own lives and turn our faces towards that wilderness so that we might reemerge ready to live in this land to which God is calling us?

That Jesus is tested three times might call to mind for some of you how Peter three times is asked who he believes Jesus is in the hours of Jesus' death. And three times Peter denies Jesus. Maybe that was because Peter hadn't yet been to the wilderness. For it is only once Jesus has died, through Peter's own journey into the night of



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hopelessness as his rabbi has been killed that Peter reemerges as a person who gives his life to follow Jesus faithfully and he becomes the rock upon which the church is built. Likewise, it is to the wilderness that Paul is called after he is converted. His eyes are opened, but he doesn't immediately begin his new ministry. No, he's formed and reformed. It's to the wilderness that God calls us in order for us to live out God's call to our lives, for it is in the wilderness that we are transformed by new possibilities and discover new ways of being.

It is maybe for this reason that the early church mothers and fathers went to the wilderness. We call them the "desert mothers and fathers" --these spiritual people who said with their lives, "We need to get away from the city because sometimes when you've been there for so long, you forget that you're not supposed to be afraid of mountain lions, but afraid of the shadows in the night that you think will keep you safe." It's a call that they knew to the wilderness, to then be encountered and transformed and to find a new way forward.

This may be in part why one of the central themes that I'm writing on in my dissertation, as I'm talking about some of my work being a part of leading in this community, is seeking to help us become the type of people who move into the wilderness. That the good life (the teleological vision for our individual formation) is discovered by our willingness to be people who go into the wild places, the places of our own stories and our own lives that are rife with terror. For it is my belief that as we go into those spaces that we find the resurrection life to which Jesus calls us. But you don't get Easter Sunday if you don't journey the way of the cross. You can't know resurrection life if we don't have Maunday Thursday, and Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. You can't get to the promised land if you don't go to the desert. And so, it's to the wilderness that we are called to turn our faces.

Now, even though I know all of this, the wild still scares me. I much prefer to live in the power of the ministry that Jesus knows later on in chapter four. I don't want to go to the wilderness. I'm afraid of starvation, let alone mountain lions. And yet we're called there.

And isn't that in part what preaching is, a reminder even to myself of the things that I know to be true, even when I don't want to acknowledge them? This Tuesday during staff meeting, Cathy Kolwey, our new spiritual formation associate, shared a poem about butterflies. And, of course it was Organic Bob, Mr. Nature himself, who reminded us that when a caterpillar gets into the cocoon and then becomes a butterfly, their entire DNA gets redone. My response to this information? I was like: "No. I don't want that. I want to be a caterpillar who the next day gets to be a butterfly." It's painful to have your DNA reoriented. It's dark and fraught.

Indeed, in the Exodus narrative, the journey out of Egypt into the promised land, the imagery there is of a birthing canal. And what is more fraught with vulnerability than the possibility of gestational promise? There is nothing more miraculous than the



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moment that sperm and egg unite and then become a human. How does that even happen? I don't understand such a mystery. But this is the journey that we, as a people, are called to go into: to move into the spaces of vulnerability, to go into the wilderness so that we might be a people who can live in the land to which God is calling us.

And when we forget, because we always will forget, we're invited again to the wild, into the wilderness. And every year in Lent, we have that same invitation because we're going to forget. So let's go back to the wild. Let's go back to the wilderness. And in that space, might we discover and recover and remember that we were meant to live in this land.

We were meant to live without fear...in spite of the monsters that we know inhabit it.

We are meant to be a people who walk in faithfulness with YHWH.

We are meant to be a people who know in our bones that we have been blessed, so we might be a blessing.

We are meant to care for the poor and the widow and the foreigners who are in our midst, but we will forget.

And so, we go back to the wilderness.

The cry of the Spirit is the one who calls us to hike those continental divides and watch the vistas that go on forever and remind ourselves that, yes, we are small, but we are not insignificant -- for we are loved. We are part of the wonder of this creation. And so, let us go back to the wilderness.

As some of you know, it was just over two years ago now, that my spouse, Andy and I had our first miscarriage. On the way to the hospital to get an ultrasound that day, I was listening to an album from one of my favorite bands, Mumford and Sons. It had just been released and a song came on called "The Wild." It starts, "We saw birth and death | Can't we be still | What makes you kind | From where comes your sparkling mind?"

As it continues they sing, "Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. What's that I see? I think it's the wild. It puts the fear of God in me." And in many ways, what is the wild, if not the place to reorder our fears?

For in this journey, as fraught and as painful as it has been, God has been doing healing work in my own life. The things I feared of parenthood, of "Would I be someone other than I wanted to be?" all of the different things that have swirled in and about my own



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story...have all become invitations to deeper reordering, to live my life in awe and in the wonder of the wild of God's invitation to healing in my own life. Yes, going to the wilderness, turning our faces towards it is, can be, and indeed will be terrifying. But we go there together. We are invited to turn from the places that we think will keep us safe and to emerge as a resurrection people who have gone into the wilderness and discovered that we do not live on bread alone, but by the love of God.

God is, and God will continue to invite us to new things until the day that we die. And we can either live our lives constructing edifices to keep us safe, making us think that the wild will never get us...or we can take up the risk and the invitation to turn towards the wild, to journey into the wilderness a little bit more. For in so doing, we will discover life, discover freedom, discover the power of the rushing wind through the trees, the whisper of promise on the morn, the way that the birds sparkle and sing, the way that the waves of Lake Superior beckon and call, the way of life.

Let us turn to the wilderness. Let us turn to Jesus.

Where are you afraid of mountain lions and feline pets? Where are we afraid of giants in the land? May we remember that Jesus has gone into the wild and then enter in.

And even more so, may we remember that the wild is where God resides.

So let us meet this tempest together and let us turn to life, for God is doing a new thing. God is calling us to live in the promised land.

Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid.

Amen.



Sermon by Sara Wilhelm Garbers
Senior Associate Minister

John 13:31-35

March 21, 2021

Turning to One Another

When Judas had gone out, Jesus said, "Now the son of man has been glorified and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and as I said to the Jews, so now I say to you: where I am going, you cannot come. I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples. If you have love for one another. John 13:31-35

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Well, hello again. As we turn to a time of sitting with this passage, will you pray with me?

Oh God who sees us, might we turn our faces towards you? And in this turning, turn towards one another. That indeed, we might be known for our love. Might we live this command, and might it be our song. Amen.

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I'm so glad to be with you this morning. We are in the midst of our Lenten series. Lent is the 40 day period leading up to Easter where, as the church, we pause to reflect and remember; to remember the God who came embodied, who came to be God with and amongst us, to invite us all to turn ourselves and find our way home. And as Jesus turned his face towards Jerusalem, we journey turn our faces and follow this way as we come to Holy Week, looking for the God who continues to turn toward us.

And indeed, this season we're considering this great turning: examining the way that God embodied with us as Emmanuel changes everything. The way that love turns the laws of the world upside down, and makes new ones possible, as we pray each week: that God's kingdom come here on earth as it is in heaven. And today, we are considering what it means that as God turns towards us, we are invited to not only turn back toward God, but to turn also to one another. As I contemplated this idea of turning to one another a few images came to mind. The first image that came to mind for me was this (the "I am a Man" images) from the 1960s civil rights movement. The signs that say: "I am a man." This image depicts the cry for recognition, for equality, and for human dignity.



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Another image that came to mind is this: of a couple on couch with a divide between them. Whether it be on a couch or on a bed, the space that looms large, even in our most intimate of relationships, where we don't any longer know how to cross that divide. And then from this week, following the senseless violence in Atlanta, I was reminded of this image of our very own Madison Chau at a rally to cry out against racism and violence against Asian American and Pacific Islander persons. A cry: "See me. See my people."

In one way, these pictures seem like they're talking about very different things. But in another way, I believe that there is a deep common thread that unites them. It's the deepest sort of human longing that each of us have, whether it's individuals or as peoples. It's the cry and the longing for recognition, naming the desire to be seen, to be honored in our dignity, to be told that we are loved and we are valued, making ourselves visible when forces seek to render us invisible and unseen.

Much work and analysis has been done at both the relational and societal levels regarding the cries for visibility and recognition. And in so many ways, I think our passage today, the theme of the call to turn toward one another, speaks of this. In the personal relationship realm, some folks who've done a lot of work on this are connected to the Gottman Institute. The Gottman Institute is located in Seattle, Washington. It's a group of psychologists whose research and work explores flourishing inside of relationships. One project of the Gottman Institute brings people into what is known as the "Love Lab," where they monitor a person's heart rate, and what's going on in them, in order to be able to explore the relational dynamics between a couple.

And with quite frightening accuracy they're able to predict whether a couple will remain together and even more so, if they will be happy and satisfied in the relationship. And one of the most significant determiners of this is how people respond to what they label as "bids." The bids that we extend to one another, bids for recognition. These bids turn up in many forms in our personal relationships of every kind, whether it's the very classic, tropic sort of thing you think of, of the partner who walks out of the closet in an outfit and says, "Does this look okay on me? Does this make me look fat?"

Now, sometimes in our common conversation we're like, "Well, you know how you're supposed to answer it. No matter what the person is wearing, you always say, oh, you look great in that." Why do we say that? And what's going on inside of that question, "Does this outfit make me look good?" Now Andy Garbers, my spouse, would say, "You don't always have to actually answer that, well, of course, because the outfit itself might actually not look good on the person. It's not that the person doesn't look good. It just might be an outfit you don't like, or maybe the outfit just it doesn't fit right. Or something is going on with the outfit. It's not about the person." That's my life being married to Andy Garbers.



And yet, when we come out and ask that question, so often what we're actually asking are a whole lot of other things. In saying: "What do you think?" as I come out the closet, I might actually be asking you, "Do you still love me? Do you think I'm attractive?" I might be actually telling you that I've been having a really hard day, and that the cultural mores and norms are really impinging on my wellbeing, and I'm not doing so well today. And I just need to know that you're for me, and you're still glad I'm your person.

These bids, whether it be an invitation to, "Oh, look, do you see that bird out there?" Or whether it be a, "Oh, this is one of my favorite songs," or "Oh, I had a really hard day." Each of these in their own way are bids longing for connection, for affirmation, for reassurance that we are for each other. That we're in one another's corners. That we see each other. The reminder that we aren't alone, no matter what it is that we are carrying. And so Gottman, in their work, says in response to these bids, there are three significant options that we have in terms of how we respond.

The first is an invitation to the possibility that *we turn toward one another*, just like our sermon today. The turning toward involves when a person asks us the question, we literally actually oftentimes turn toward them. We acknowledge that they have said what they did, or the question that they had. We honor it as a valid one. We respond out of the knowledge that we have of the person and/or get more curious if we're not quite sure how to reply. We turn toward one another. But sometimes what happens is that in these bids for recognition, *we actually turn away*.

Now we have so many good reasons we turn away. Just yesterday, I had a migraine all day and found myself turning away from Andy, in a moment, in a bid for recognition that he had extended. And I knew exactly what was happening, but I was tired and my head hurt. Sometimes we turn away, whether it is, we literally just don't turn when the person asks for that moment of recognition, whether it is we miss the question. In some way, we turn away from them, and the intimacy of whatever type of relationship that is, is melted away, and over time if we turn away, the divide becomes so great that it is difficult to bridge.

But the final and most devastating way that we can respond to one another is we *turn against one another*. So say one walks out of the closet and asks: "Does this look good on me?" If we say cruel and hurtful things to the other person arising out of our own places of vulnerability, insecurity, anger, things that we have not dealt with. If we do this, we turn against, and our most intimate of relationships and friendships become places of violence, places where I won't come out and ask you that question again, because now the person closest to me has made me believe that I'm worth nothing. And in all of our relationships, whether they be ones here at church, with our families, our friends, we have these options and opportunities for how we will respond to the bid.

Will we turn toward? Will we turn away? Will we turn against? Now, while Gottman's



research has focused specifically on intimate partner relationships, these same questions are questions that echo on societal levels as well. Those signs that those men were carrying during the civil rights era of the 1960s were nothing if not bids... bids for recognition. Bids to call and invite a country and their white fellow citizens to turn toward them, to see them, not to turn away and ignore the question, ask what is wrong with them that they dare ask for recognition, let alone to turn against them believing that they were less than human. These calls and cries, these bids, are present everywhere in our personal lives, in our life as a church, and in our nation.

This exploration of the longing for recognition and desire to be seen also permeates a major part of the discourses inside of my doctoral studies. The field of study is known as the theory of recognition. Many theologians, ethicists, social scientists, and philosophers who, following World War II, sought to make sense of the thing that which was incomprehensible, namely: How does genocide happen? How do people who have been neighbors so turn against one another, that it allows for death camps? This wrestling with recognition and the cry for it is something both at the theoretical, but it is something at the tangible and embodied level that we live and wrestle with each and every single day. And our passage in John 13 is nothing if not an example of what recognition and the turn toward one another looks like.

For earlier in this chapter, as many of you know, during the festival of Passover, which we celebrate each Maundy Thursday, Jesus gathered with his disciples, washed their feet, embodying and demonstrating to them what it means to turn toward one another in the most humble and loving sort of way. God embodied with us got on his knees, and washed the feet of his disciples, showing them that the act of service, of putting himself as lower, was the way that God shows up in the world to save and heal.

As the passage continues, we are told that Jesus knows that Judas will betray him. And we don't know exactly why Judas does this. Likewise, we don't always know in our intimate relationships, why we turn away or why we turn against. We have reasons from our own stories. Maybe Judas was terrified. Maybe Judas knew that everyone was going to turn against Jesus, and the revolution that he thought was coming, wasn't going to happen. We don't know why. But even as Jesus turned toward him, Judas couldn't complete that turning back towards Jesus. And instead he turned against, turning Jesus over to the authorities that would lead to his death. And yet Jesus, after the Passover and washing of the feet, says to them, "Listen, here's the thing. I've got a command for you."

This is not St. Aquinas's tomes of theology. Just one command is issued here: that you love one another, as I have loved you. That's it. For by this, will everyone know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. And the greatest commandments that we know and that we have talked about so much are to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves, and yet to actually do this, to turn toward one another, to turn toward God is really, really hard work. It's vulnerable. It takes a lifetime. We



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mess up all the time, and yet the invitation and the call remains—for us to be a people who, as we turn toward Jesus, we then turn toward one another again and again.

“Do you see me? Are you still for me? Do I matter?” These questions and these hauntings, they sit with us and we wrestle with them.

When I was interviewing to come to this church three and a half years ago, I felt a deep sense of call to be here. In the midst of a world in which we struggle to talk to one another across political lines, I knew of this church, a place in which people who didn't always agree, came together as good Congregationalists to wrestle. To, in seeking Christ with one another, to serve and love all of God's world.

And one night I had a dream. I had a dream that the spirit in the water underneath this place (for indeed, we are surrounded and built on a wetland, sustained on pylons) bubbled up from the ground beneath this place and a new wind blew. And the Spirit rushed through the hallways, through the meeting house and blew off the doors on this place. And when I woke, I knew that I was called to come here, because God was doing a new thing. A thing connected the beauty and the power of our past, but with breath of fresh for all of us.

God is doing a new thing. And it's been hard. We've lived in the midst of COVID, with our former senior minister, Daniel's wife Dawn, dying. As many of us are facing the challenges of aging and isolation. And there's so much going on in our world that tells us that we can't and shouldn't even talk to one another. That in the midst of a history, even in our country, which we have spoken about this week that includes things like the Chinese Exclusion Act, that to name and grieve about that labels us as being of a particular political party.

But that's not why we're here. **We are here because we follow this Jesus.** This Jesus who gets on his knees and washes all of our feet and calls us to turn toward one another. That's it. That is the point. We are called to be a people who are known by our love. And I know I miss it! I know in the wrestling about our name change that some of you aren't sure if I love you, and some of you aren't sure if you want to love me. And it's hard. But if I know and believe in anything, I believe in this Jesus and I have known in my own life what it feels like to be seen. To have the little girl and the young woman and the 30 something person I am have moments of fear and terror, where I'm not sure if I'm lovable or if maybe I'm actually alone.

And God continues to turn toward me and say, “I see you and you are loved, breathe, my dear one, and welcome home.” And I have seen and experienced this in relationship as well. I have seen it in this place. When we remember that God has turned towards us and we are called and invited to turn toward one another, so that we turn towards this world, because that's what the church is. It's a place of human, frail, vulnerable people who are loved, and who, if we will but turn our faces towards this Jesus, let ourselves be healed anew and afresh, our feet be washed again this



Lent. That we then live as that kind of servant people in the world, washing the dirt off one another's faces, offering safety and shelter for those who have been harmed, refusing the dichotomies that label people or each other clean or unclean. And instead say we, we will be known by our love.

Let us turn toward one another. I'm willing to do that. Are you?

Let us turn, and let us know that we are Christians, and let the world know that we are Christians by this love.

Oh, God of love and Christ, glow afresh and anew in our hearts. Let us turn toward you, that we might turn toward this world. For it's in your name, and in your love, we gather. Amen.

Finding Rest

Matthew 11:28-30

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens. And I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

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Will you pray with me? Jesus, on this day, we come to you. We come to you—however we come—whether weary, whether filled with joy, whether many things. God, may we find rest in you. And may we be a people of that rest in a world that is weary. In your name we gather and we pray. Amen.

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It's so good being with you all. And for those who are in the Meetinghouse, it's especially lovely to see your faces and be in worship with you today. Thank you, Lisa, for reading the text for us this morning and reminding us that is indeed one of the ways that we speak about the Bible is that it is the God-breathed Word. And that breath then is breath that is also for us and for our souls.

Back when I was in college, I worked as an associate junior high youth minister at Westwood Community Church, where I came of age. Every summer, we took our junior high students on a trip to the Ozark mountains for a week of camp. In the days leading up to the trip I discovered that the youth pastor mistakenly believed that I played the guitar...and he was expecting me to lead worship...a rather presumptuous assumption to make. I discovered this assumption about 10 days before said retreat. Thankfully I had been trained as a pianist and had completed musical theory through Minnesota Music Teachers Association.

So thankfully, on account of my years of piano study, I was able to transpose all of the worship songs into the four chords I learned to play on the guitar in 10 days. As I led worship during the retreat, it was an amazing experience for me as I watched these wonderful young people, including a bunch of my brother's friends who were 14 years old, move from a space where faith had been their parents, to for the first time experiencing a faith that was theirs. I watched as they cried and opened up in new ways, and it was a beautiful thing to witness.

Now, being who I am, I can't just do something halfway. So, when I picked up the guitar, I didn't stop with just learning a few cords...and started writing some of my own songs. Not that they were very good, but they were mine. One of them was based off of this passage, "Come to me, all you who are weary and you will find rest.

Come and learn of me. Take my yoke and load upon you." In that song I wrote about this passage I explored the question: "What forms you?" For all of us, are shaped and formed by something. As this passage assumes- we all labor under different yokes, so what is the yoke that is upon us? What are the things that determine how we show up in the world and how we move in it?

More than anything, I didn't want these junior highers to forget the experience that they had had in the Ozark mountains. I longed for them to remember as they went forward, that they could carry the same Jesus with them and the experiences of opening themselves up. As I wrote in the song, "we're all formed by something, but does this set us free?" Today, that is one of the two questions that I want us to explore together:

1. What are you formed by? And
2. Does what forms you bring you rest?

What are you formed by, and does it bring you rest?

In these coming weeks, we're going to be focusing on a sermon series entitled "How to Breathe." This year, we've been talking about, what it means for us to be the church. We began the year at the 10,000-foot level, going book-by-book through the Bible (well, not exactly book-by-book as that would have taken 66 weeks), but virtually book by book as we thematically explored what it means to be the people of God. What does it mean to be the church? What are the qualities and characteristics of a group of people who gather around the cross and identify themselves as Christian? We then in the winter, after Advent and Christmas, moved to talking about the specifics of congregationalism. If you didn't participate in the congregationalism class, do not worry. YouTube is still a thing and you can go watch Christian's class on congregationalism there!

So in the winter we moved from a 10,000 foot overview of what it means to be the church to remembering our own tradition in history as Congregationalists. Now, in this series, we want to talk about US- our church. Who has God called us to be over the last 75 years? What has it meant for us to be this church, and how might some of that history find its language and being in the next 75 years? How do we breathe? Breathe in and breathe out as a people formed by the breath of the Spirit of God who then live that breathe life through our lives and in the world? How do we breathe together? How can we be the church? What forms us? Are we a people of rest?

Each week, we're going to consider a part of our legacy and tradition as a community of faith, and then wonder together at how God is inviting us forward. Today, we wanted to focus on one thread of who we've been, which is that of spiritual formation, spiritual growth, and how that impacts and invites us forward.

Now, some of you know this, but the real first interaction I had with this community

of faith was when I was in seminary. It was my first spiritual formation class, one of three courses that we took when I was at Bethel Seminary. During this course, we read a little book that some of you have heard about, called *The Critical Journey*, written by our very own Bob Guelich and Janet Hagberg.

Now, I had grown up inside of the church, had loved Jesus and felt loved by Jesus. And as you well know if you've listened to any one of my sermons or have ever heard from me, there was so much beauty in that growing up, AND there also was pain as I wrestled with integrating the God of John 3:16, in which I'd so earnestly believed—a God of love yet questioning if I was truly loved. Did God love women the same as men? Was God ok with violence and oppression? These and many other questions also haunted me. So much so that by the time I started seminary in many ways it was my ultimate wrestling match. I needed to understand if this God of love that I had grown up believing in was for me, and if I could continue to walk in that way of faith and flourish as myself.

Now, my personality is such that I actually don't really like sitting in doubt or struggling with things. I'd much rather have a really good party and power forward into beautiful visions for the future. Yet, my brain has always worked a little bit overtime, and I'm not really good at sweeping things under rugs. So, I found myself in seminary reading this book. As I read the pages, I realized that maybe I wasn't alone. Maybe I wasn't the problem. Because what they talked about in their stages of the critical journey of faith is that all of us, at one point or another, encounter "the wall." We encounter these moments where the answers that we had before just aren't able to answer our questions and longings in the same way. Or one of our grandkids starts talking about something and we think, "Oh my goodness, what are they talking about? I don't even know what this is."

Something happens, whether it's death or loss, or grief. And in order to continue to grow in our faith, we are invited and indeed asked to wrestle with that space. We can't get around it. We can't ignore it. We can't just sweep it under the rug and hope it'll never come back. Our invitation in our journey of faith is to wrestle and to move into that space of question, wrestling, and/or doubt. And what a gift of grace that book was for me! I'll never forget when I first saw the model and read more about it. I thought, "I'm not alone! You mean other people have doubts? You mean other people want to wrestle and shake their fists at God?" That was my first encounter in a deep way, with the legacy of this community. Indeed, our mission statement for so long has been: "A place to grow in Christ and serve the world."

To grow in Christ is not a stagnant thing. To grow is to be rooted like that tree in Psalm 1 and to continue to develop and be formed. To be part of God's ecosystem of life. That's what we've been about, whether it be through centering prayer, the center for spiritual formation that we have had, the work that some of you have done in spiritual direction, and/or the retreats you've gone on. How many of you have experienced some kind of growth in your spiritual life? I'm going to say basically all of us, right? This is one of the things that I've loved about our community: we're a

place that seeks to integrate our hands and our hearts and our lives, that we might be transformed again and again through the encounter with God in Christ. That we aren't the same today as we were yesterday. And some of the future days will be really hard, but we know that we follow a God of resurrection who brings us through death into new life and new birth again and again.

So, I come back to these questions: what forms you, and does it bring you rest?

As our passage talks about, we're all formed by something. We're all growing towards something. We're all rooted in different soils. Now, some of this comes about just from the legacies of our families, the histories of where the people who birthed us, where they were formed. I grew up in my grandma's tradition and we were the strong Swedish family. My dad's side was the Norwegian side, and I didn't understand when I would go to my Norwegian side grandma's house because she never talked about anything. And then you would find out you had done something bad because then she quit talking to you. I never could figure it out, because I was more formed as a Swedish person. That's more of my lineage, because we talk about everything all of the time, don't ya know (ha!). But we did talk far more than my Norwegian grandma did, anyway!

We are formed by our ethnic histories. We're formed by our race. We're formed by our personalities and our genders. We're formed by the things that we're passionate about and bring us life. We're formed through relationships and teachers. Are you calling anyone to mind? We're formed by those experiences, whether they are times like those youth experience in the Ozark mountains, worshiping God with a faith that was your own for the first time.

What forms you, and does it bring you rest?

The first time I preached at our church was in December of 2015. Daniel Harrell was on sabbatical, and Greg Meland had introduced me to him as a possible guest preacher. Jeff Lindsay was here that day and helped me to done a robe and a stole for the first time in my life, which I didn't know that that's what it was called because I was raised a Baptist. And I was able to preach that last Sunday of 2015. And in many ways, I think what I preached that Sunday told you something even then about what forms me and has brought me to this place.

In that sermon, I talked about I John and about the perfect love that drives out fear, which I talk about ad nauseum, because that's what has formed me. I've been formed through the discovery of the God of love in Christ, whose love has healed me more and more deeply throughout my life. That healing work is imperfect and won't ever be complete until the last day that I draw a breath. But that perfecting love forms and animates my life, my belief that this God of love is in the business of perfecting each of us in love in order to drive out our fear and allow us to be a free people.

In that same sermon, I talked about one of my favorite films, *Chocolat*. Any *Chocolat*

film lovers in this house? It tells the story of a town where everyone wanted everything to look perfect. From the preacher who secretly danced out behind the church to 1950s rock songs, but then acted all proper and staid in his sermons. To the mayor who didn't want anyone to know that his wife had left him. To the woman in an abusive relationship who was covering it up. And into town flies this woman during Lent...who brings chocolate. For me, I believe that is the breath and the wind of the Holy Spirit. That in the places of our lives, where we seek control and ego defense and protection, God comes in with some good old chocolate breath and says, "Taste and eat, for this is good. And it is for you." And through that tasting, people begin to emerge from their places of secrecy and silence, and pain, and they find community. They find their lives change. They find themselves healed.

What if nothing else are we called to be as the church, but a people who thus formed by this God of love, then show up and bring the gift of good news and life into the world?

What forms you? Does what form you bring you rest?

What parts of your own story have been left behind because maybe perfect love just can't quite touch it?

Many of you know that my grandma Joey was a very important person in my life. Even though she lived through so much suffering and pain, she showed up and loved me with a love that was perfecting. My grandma, on account of her own pain and suffering and the time in which she had been raised and lived, believed that her own trauma was best swept under the rug. And even though she came to faith in the 1970s and she loved Jesus, she didn't experience much rest. She was haunted by her own story. She was haunted by the belief that she was beyond love. A survivor of childhood incest, married to a man who had never loved her, she longed for love. I remember being in my early 20s and sitting with her at her kitchen table and saying, "Grandma, you know that if you just sweep stuff under the rug, it just comes out sideways." And she, as my grandma would often say, "Oh Sar..." That was always her like, "Oh, you ask me too many questions and push me too hard on things. But I love you anyway."

I continued to invite my gram to live the love that she had shown me. And in my grandma's journey through dementia, at the very end of her life, I will never forget the moment at Christmas that year when her gaze turned to the cardinal which was hung on the Christmas tree at my aunt's house, the bird, which my grandma experienced as God telling her she was not alone. She didn't even remember most of our names. But suddenly, she looked up at this bird and her face became aglow. And I started crying because I knew that my grandma had found rest and peace for her weary soul. I knew that the passage that we referenced earlier today of Jesus saying, "Come to me, who are weary," that my grandma was getting to unload those burdens that had been weighing her down.

What forms you, and does it bring you rest?

When I first arrived here as a minister, I was working on my doctoral dissertation. It was on sexual violence and trauma, exploring how the cross might offer a message of hope to survivors of sexual violence. Now, as it turned out, the last few years have not been exactly what I thought they were going to be. There's been a lot going on... you know, just a global pandemic, deepened awareness of racial violence and injustice, talking about changing our name and wrestling with that, not being able to worship in physical space together, and our former senior minister's wife being diagnosed with pancreas cancer and dying. Wow. What a three years it has been.

And as it turns out, that on account of both the work here, my own story, my own grandma dying, my brother's hospitalization, that trying to figure out how to write about sexual violence on the side was really hard. That, combined with the legacy of a person who had been in my program who was abusive and toxic, plus my dissertation was going to be 850 pages and I was only at 150, I talked to my professor and two Decembers ago and said, "I think I need to quit." And I did. Until I received MLK weekend of 2020 when we had a Zoom conversation, and she said, "Sara, I've been thinking a lot about this. It seems that you're exactly in the place that you need to be right now. But Sara, when I listen to you preach, you're not just a preacher, you're an ethicist."

And so, she invited me to utilize my sermons to talk about formation and the work that was being done within me and how I understand my work as a part of the leadership of this community. Making this change has been a gift in so many ways and has allowed me to more deeply explore the truth of why I went into a doctorate in ethics: because I've long been concerned about the gaps between the theologies we profess and the way we live our lives. I don't know a one of us in here who wouldn't say that God is love, but how many of us have struggled to believe that we're lovable? I don't know a one of us who would say we're not called to love our neighbors as ourselves. Yet, does anyone else ever find that loving hard? I don't know a one of us who doesn't believe that God wants to take and has indeed taken our burdens in Christ. Yet, do you ever find yourself carrying more than you want to? The gap between these professed and embodied beliefs is the work of ethics.

We're human, we're in process. And sometimes, we're not aware of what is forming us. We're not aware of sometimes how the things that we experienced as young people impacts our ability to let the gospel saturate into our bones. It's totally normal and totally human to have such gaps between professed and embodied beliefs. And I wanted to study ethics because I wanted to think more about the ways that we might bridge and integrate the theologies we profess and the way we live our lives. For instance, we have long said that we are a pilgrim people. What is that image evoke? What does it mean for us? In one of my first sermons here in this community, I was able to utilize the tapestry that Janet Hagberg had created. It was an angel with a pilgrim sash around.

In that sermon, I talked about what it meant to be a people on pilgrimage. Because it matters if our image of the pilgrim is rooted first and primarily in persons who settled in the United States, or if it is rooted in a place of being a people on pilgrimage, a people on spiritual journey who continue to grow and be changed and transformed. The images we have, the stories and the histories we tell all matter for how we live our lives. Part of our invitation as people of faith and the work we have done as a community around spiritual formation is to take out those parts of our stories, to explore our fears, to notice the way we're living, and to get curious about what forms us, praying and seeking that we would be a people more deeply formed by the love of God and Christ tomorrow than we are today. A people who continue to turn over our burdens, to root ourselves in prayer that heals, and to find rest.

We are invited to be a people who remember how to breathe. To breathe in the Spirit and breathe it out. This is our invitation, to be a people who are so changed and are able to live rest. Then we get to be that rest in a weary world because we ourselves know and are living into the good news. Not that we "have attained all this or have already been made perfect, but we press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus has taken hold of us." That invitation is the invitation to life and to freedom...so may we breathe in. May we know the hand of the loving God which shapes us and says, "Take my load, for I am humble and good of heart and *for* you." We're invited to be born again each and every day. This journey to go in into those dark places, to exploring what forms us, can be really scary and really hard. But it is necessary.

The last thing I'll say about this work of spiritual formation and the call to wrestle with what forms us and to ask if it brings us rest is that if I believe in anything, this Sunday after Easter, it's that I believe in resurrection. That as we die to the things of flesh, of ego and self-preservation, as we open our hands and surrender, as we breathe anew, we are brought into new life. A life that allows us to grow more and more as we see ourselves as we are seen. You are beloved by God. God has called you to come and unburden yourself. Might we live with our hands in open surrender, formed by this God so that we might know rest. And let us then be that rest as we are the church for all the days to come.

Let us pray. Oh God, who is our rest, might we find our rest in thee. And in this breath, and in this unlearning, might we learn your ways and might your love and grace heal and transform us that we might be spiritually formed to evermore become and be your people. A people of rest in this weary world. Go with us now, oh Christ, and breathe on us, oh Spirit. For it's in your name we do all things. Amen.



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Sermon by Sara Wilhelm Garbers
Senior Associate Minister
and Bob Dahm, Organic Bob

Psalm 104:1-6, 10-24

For the Beauty

April 18, 2021

Bless the Lord O my soul. Oh Lord, my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honor and majesty. Wrapped in light as with a garment and you stretch out the heavens like a tent. You set the beams of your chambers on the waters and make the clouds your chariot. You ride on the wings of the wind. You make the winds your messengers. Fire and flames, your ministers. You set the earth on its foundation, so that it will never be shaken. You cover it with a deep, as with a garment, the waters stood above the mountains. You make springs gush forth in the valleys. They flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animal, the wild asses quench their thirst. By the streams, the birds of the air have their habitation.

They sing among the branches. From your love to a bird, your water the mountains, the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work. You cause the grass to grow for the cattle and plants for people to use, to bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the human heart. Oil, to make the face shine and bread to strengthen the human heart. The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly. The cedars of Lebanon that he planted, in them, the birds build their nests. The stork is its home in the fir trees. The high mountains are for the wild goats, the rocks are a refuge for the conies. You have made the moon to mark the seasons. The sun knows it's time for setting. You make darkness, and it is night, when all the animals of the forest come creeping out. The young lands rule for their praise, seeking their food from God.

When the sun rises, they withdraw and lie down in their dens. People go out to their work and to the labor until the evening. O Lord, how manifold, are your works. In wisdom, you have made them all. The earth is full of your creatures.

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Sara: Thanks be to God! This morning, as we consider and sit with this scripture and the invitation to all of us, will you begin in prayer with me, please?

God, on this day we join with the Psalmist of old, with our hearts proclaiming: "for the beauty of your earth, for the wonder of each hour, for the joy of ear and eye and heart and mind, and the joy of human love, and for thyself best gift divine, who to the world was so freely given, for that great, great love of thy in peace on earth and joy in heaven." Indeed, Lord of all, to you, we raise, this our hymn and our lives of grateful praise.

Amen.

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Part I: The Connection between Faith & Creation

Sara: I don't know if you receive *Colonial Weekly*, but if so, you may have gotten as excited as I have been, because we have our very own Organic Bob in the house today! In talking with the Creation Care Ministry Action Team about this month, which includes Arbor and Earth Days, in view of our sermon series as we are exploring our historic distinctives as a community of faith, I thought, we needed to have Organic Bob preaching to us! Not only he's a good man, but because he also knows all the things about all of the things related to creation...that I don't know anything about. Bob, we are so glad to be here with you this morning!

Thinking about the beauty of creation, and especially in view of both the multiple mass shootings and another black man, Daunte Wright, being killed in Brooklyn Center, it's just so much, right? In some ways it could seem a little strange to be preaching about creation. And yet today, as we begin this exploration and leaning into God's invitation for us, I wanted to start back in Genesis. In the very beginning, we're told that God was the creator God, who created all things, including all of us. And in those earliest days of creation, God looked at everything God created and named it *tov*, which is the fullness of goodness, that all of the created order was made before we had breath. And indeed, after humans are created, the next day is set apart for rest. I love that this is the case because it reminds us that we're not the creators, we're the created ones who then get to join with creation in singing and living lives that honor the creator and all of creation.

Now, if you know the story from the book of Genesis though, what you know is that after creation, the humans got to walk in the garden with God and one another, and they didn't have any shame. They had everything that they needed. Of course, humans being human, they made decisions, as we continue to make similar decisions which take us out of the garden and we forget how we were created to live...so much so that already by Genesis chapter four which features the story of Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam and Eve, that Cain kills his brother because he doesn't believe that there is enough, that God's love couldn't be for both of them equally, even as they are different. And after his death, God shows up and says to Cain, "Where is your brother?" To which Cain respond: "Am I my brother's keeper?" The answer to his question is, of course, yes.

Only four chapters in from the opening of the Bible, and we've moved from the beauty, the *tov*, the goodness of creation, walking with God in the garden to forgetting how we were meant to live. And when we forget how we were meant to live, we harm and kill one another. So part of our extending the invitation to live as people of faith who follow this Creator God, is because when we remember that we were meant to walk in the garden, it helps us to live garden lives, in sync with the God who is the God of all creation...including us and every single human being and



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breathing thing on this earth. For all of this is created by the Creator God. And it's all connected. And it's all good. But our ability to live out that love (or not) is shaped by our ability to remember where and how we were meant to walk. And so, as we explore the call to live our faith in the midst of creation together, to explore what it means to live "for the beauty" we will wonder what it might look like for us to return to the garden and to walk with God and one another, without shame. Now, let's hear a little bit from Organic Bob.

Bob: There was a tribe in Africa who grew yams. When Western agricultural ideas came to them, they offered the possibility that they could exponentially increase their crop yield. With more yams, instead of subsisting, they'd have a little money in their pockets and they're all in, saying: "Yes, let's do this!" And what they found out, after these massive yields on land that had taken care of them for millennia, was health problems started to crop up in the tribe that they hadn't had before. The food that was grown with the Western industrial agriculture had less nutritional density. And so they were suffering types of malnutrition because the chemicals that were designed to increase crop yields actually kill organisms in the soil that make food nutritious. And they also impart into the soil, some toxins that the food will pick up and we ingest. So they started having all these problems: health problems and that then led to social problems.

The Western agriculture suppliers started to raise the prices of the supplies they needed. And because they needed more and more, so it was almost like a drug dealer, and the social collapse that happened after this, was families fighting over finances, domestic abuse crept in, alcohol and other addiction. And these farmers were losing farms that had been in their family for centuries, and that led to suicide. So there was a lot of despair in the greed that was brought in.

Part II: God's Ecosystem

Sara: So today we want to explore together, what does it mean for us to live as a part of God's ecosystem? God's vision for creation and for all of us. What does God desire for us? Theologian Sally McFague notes that the etymology of our current words, ecological, ecumenical, and economic, all stem from the Greek word *oikos*, which is translated as house. So in so many ways, ecology, McFague writes, is simply "words about home." Ecology: "Words about home."

Some of you may recall the biblical passage when Jesus said: "In my father's house are many rooms and there's space for all of you. I'm going to prepare that place for you." Indeed, Jesus came here to invite us to remember what it's like to live at home, to bring forth that garden life that we were all invited and were meant to live in. We're meant to be a people who walk with God, who care for this earth and for one another...because that is who God is, and Jesus comes and invites us to remember and be born again so that we can remember the things that we've forgotten: that the earth isn't ours to just use, that we aren't each other's to abuse, but that we all are image



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bearers invited to remember these “words about home” and to come home, to live home, and to bring home to this world. That’s what we pray every week, right? That the kingdom would come here on earth, as it is in heaven. Come home. Bring home. Live home. This is what it means to follow and walk in the garden with this creator, to live in accordance with the ecosystem of God. Again, a word from Bob.

Bob: Many of you know I grew up on a farm in Iowa, and my mom was a school teacher and she also taught soil conservation to farmers and school kids, and pretty much anybody who would listen (and a few that wouldn’t...but that didn’t stop her). And I watched my dad and my grandfather, and then a couple years ago, my brother, all die of cancer. And a lot of these farmers I worked for over the summers, were dying of cancer and other chronic illnesses. And what I’ve learned in the years since then is that these chemicals carry a hidden cost. I have a lawn business and when I go out and we’ll see lawns that have been managed chemically and they’re beautiful, but when they stopped the chemicals, they start to fall apart. And what I learned was that the chemicals that they put down to take care of certain problems, they killed the organisms in the soil that would normally take care of those problems.

So, if the soil is healthy, the lawn will be healthy and it will be able to crowd out weeds. Well, the soil wasn’t healthy when you’re putting all these contaminants onto it. And even synthetic fertilizers turned into salts when they degrade. So we’re salting the soil, but once you start doing things the way that God does them, naturally, it begins to heal itself immediately.

Part III: The Beauty of Diversity

Bob: I go to a lot of these workshops for sustainable agriculture. And a couple of years ago, I heard this woman speak, Dr. Suzanne Simard. And she did a study and there’s a lot of YouTube videos about it. And it’s about how trees talk to each other, and she did this in the Pacific Northwest. And there’s these great, big old trees, the old growth forest, and in those are some very large trees that they call mother trees.

Below the ground in this healthy, pristine soil, is a fungal network. Now, these fungi attach onto the roots of plants and they feed on what the plants put into the soil. Now, the carbohydrates centered there, and they can tell by what they’re getting, what the tree needs. So they’ll say: “Mama Redwood, you need calcium.” And they go out and get calcium from the soil and bring it back and feed it to the host plant. Cool, huh? But these fungal networks are attached to all kinds of trees and other plants. So this mother tree will form more of these fungal associations, these connections, with its offspring. They know, and then if there’s a tree that’s sick, the other trees will send nutrients to that tree through this fungal network. And again, if a tree is dying, the flow reverses, it empties itself into the community. So basically...trees have the moral code that we aspire to.

Sara: I love when Bob talks about stuff! Every time he shares I am struck by that I



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don't know about these things and it opens me to new ways of thinking and understanding faith, the world, God, and myself. One of the things that Bob was talking about in terms of the soil, and then also in terms of the way that these systems of trees care for each other is... Bob and I, as we were talking about this, we're talking about the beauty of diversity and the way that we have the image from Corinthians, of the body of Christ, how every part is needed and all of the members, likewise, a soil cannot be healthy unless it has all of the diverse nutrients, and an ecosystem can't be healthy unless it has everything from pesky mosquitoes...

They're supposed to be part of the ecosystem, right? Yeah. Ok, Bob.

I admit it: there is importance of diversity if there is to be a healthy ecosystem. In MN we need everything from mosquitoes to maple trees. All of this is part of the life flourishing that God intends and God creates. And we're a part of God's ecosystem. We're a part of this beauty and that invitation to remember that we cannot make it alone, and we were never meant to; that the beauty and wonder of creation reminds us that it takes all of us and all of created life. So might we continue to look to creation and remember the wonder of the God who comes from the mountains, who is indeed our help and our healer of all of life has named as beautiful and necessary the manifest diversity of creation. Once again, a word from Bob.

Part IV: Garden Living

Bob: I was doing a lot of pondering in preparation for today, and I had an epiphany that the way that we treat the environment is very similar to the way we treat women and minorities. We have this power over this environment and the choices that we make are many times to exploit, overharvest, abuse, just treat it as something we can get a resource from, instead of something that should be stewarded, something that should be nurtured, something that like the weeds, the solution lies in the problem. The weeds are telling us what the ecosystem needs and that metaphor carries through to minorities. Young black men are telling us what they need, and we need to listen to those and create a diverse community, because that's what heals in the soil and in culture.

Sara: Sometimes when we have conversations, whether it's about topics like racism or climate change or creation, they quickly become political conversations and we cease to be curious about what our faith might be asking of us. We're gathered here today because we're the church and we're in the midst of a sermon series called "How To Breathe." We're exploring who we've been as a community and asking who we might become together. And one of the distinctives about how we are church together is that we've long been concerned about creation; we've lived faith that believes that faith and spirituality is animated and brought to life in the midst of nature: whether it be trips you've gone on where you've encountered God in nature, whether it's work you've done in creation care at church, or digging in your yard. We know that faith and the environment have something to do with one another. So when Bob told me



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about his recent epiphany on a Zoom call, and he shares with me what he just told you, I find myself left silent, with tears in my eyes, filled with gratitude for Bob's heart for Jesus, all people, and all of creation.

When he told me of this epiphany, he said: "Sara, we need to have a spiritual awakening!" And I kept crying, moved by how seen and understood I feel. You see, so many Christians have dismissed me as a feminist, as if that has nothing to do with faith, ignoring that I became a women's studies minor in college *because* I believed in Jesus and that Jesus cared for all of us. And the invitation Bob just shared with us, to see this all as connected is what we wanted to share with you today: that our call as a people of faith is to follow the Creator God, to be born again and anew, to be a people who remember that we were meant to live in the garden. Indeed, in the vision of Revelation, heaven isn't some far off place, but the vision of heaven is Eden restored. As theologian, Sandra Richter writes, "revelation is profoundly ecological in the sense of declaring God's commitment to earth as the location for salvation."

For God became embodied as Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God-with-us, in this skin, in bones like ours, to invite and call and remind each of us that new life is possible for us, in the here and now. It's not complete; it's not perfect, but we get to live into it. We are free to follow after this God who invites us to spiritual renewal that we might also have epiphanies like Bob's where we see that it is all connected. And as we turn to this God and allow ourselves to be re-awoken, we get to remember a little bit more of what it means for us to walk in the garden. And so the invitation today to each of us is to go outside, to look around, maybe to read a Psalm of creation, maybe to write aloud your own Psalm of creation, giving thanks to the God who is the creator of all things, including us...and to remember that in your skin and in your bones, you were meant to walk with God, and with each of us in the midst of God's beauty and wonder of creation, without shame.

So might we return to the garden, following after this Jesus who invites us to live and might we then breathe in, because right? We need trees to breathe anyway. Might we return to garden living, dear friends.

Let us pray together. God, of all creation, of water, earth and sky, the heavens are your tabernacle, and yet you also dwell with us. So might we, God, be born again by your spirit to walk in the garden of this life with you, to not be afraid or ashamed, to remember that we are indeed all of earth's keeper and to live with that love and grace as your church, as this church, that we might grow in Christ. And we might serve this world, Amen.

Final Reflection: Elements Poem

Bob: I was wondering how to bring a message about creation care and what that means to me, how to immerse myself in the spiritual side of nature. All those reflections came out in the form of this poem called "Elements."



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Elements

Let the air
nurture me
like a bed sheet on the line
as it drapes, swells, and flickers
across my face and arms.

Your water shall gently care for me
with soft rains falling,
bathing the earth,
like a momma cat
bathing her kitten.

You set the earth
to feed me.
Daily I am created
from the soil
and my soul is fed
by the awesome majesty
in the natural world.

This earth
was made by You
for me,
for us.
It is a place for love.
Creator love for the Created
and Creation.
We become part of this cycle
whenever we love.

- Robert C. Dahm



Living Thanks

I Chronicles 16:7-13

It was then, that David first composed this Psalm of thanks to Yahweh, and dedicated it to Asaph and his family. Give thanks to the Yahweh. Call upon God's name. Proclaim God's deeds among the nations. Sing to God, sing praise and tell of all God's marvels. Glory in God's holy name. Let the hearts that seek Yahweh rejoice. Turn to Yahweh, to God's strength and seek God's presence, constantly. Remember the marvels God has done, the wonders performed and the judgments pronounced, you, descendants of Sarah and Abraham, God's faithful ones, you, children of Leah, Rachel and Jacob, God's chosen.

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Will you pray with me? Loving God, on this morning, we pray that by your spirit, we would live and give thanks for the gifts of community, for the gifts of your love and for the gift, indeed, of very breadth and life. For it's in Christ's name that we gather. Amen.

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Well, hello again, long time, no see. It's like a minute and a half ago! I'm so glad to be able to be with you this morning as we have been going through a series called how to breathe, remembering and reminding ourselves of some of the distinctives of this particular community of faith.

A big part of the legacy of this community and the wonder that many of you have expressed back through the reforming process, is the ways in which music and worship and the arts have shaped you, have formed your faith and have been a distinctive of who we are as a community.

So today we're going to explore and kind of look back at some of that, as we then also look forward to who God is inviting us to continue to be, and is in our midst. To do that, I wanted to begin by telling you a story.

It was December. It was a beautiful, beautiful evening. Every year, instead of giving each other presents, Andy and I go on a Christmas date. And this particular year --it was the year of my first pregnancy-- we went on a Christmas date not only with just ourselves, but we went on a special date with our adopted family members, Greg and Linda.

This night, we went and ate steak at Marie's. It was my first time. It was really good. I had to get it medium, well (though, I'm a medium rare steak woman, usually). It was a wonderful evening. And then after that, we went to Minnesota Orchestra Hall to



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hear Gregory Porter, who, if you know that name, you'll know he's a jazz vocalist whose voice sounds like butter. And he was joined by the Minnesota orchestra for a special night of music.

As we gathered together, I looked around the room in awe, with realization that this was probably the most racially diverse gathering for a musical experience I had had thus far in Minnesota. Gregory began to sing old Nat King Cole standards, it was a particular favorite of mine on account of my grandma Joey. I sat there that night, filled with life in my body, surrounded by life and love and the goodness of God, and this family that has been created and I've gotten to enjoy. And I listened to the music as it wafted through the air and the lights twinkled in a way that was magical. And I sat there and I thought, "I am so grateful to be alive."

Have you ever had an experience like that with music? Been at a concert or even here in the Meetinghouse when the chamber singers have finished a piece? And it just reverberates and you think... What would you call to mind of an experience of the arts or of music that's opened you up? That's one of the things I've always loved about the arts.

I know for me, anyway, I spend so much of my life in my rational brain. I'm thinking and wrestling, or... I don't know if there's a separate part of my brain, but I use the other part for relationships. But then I have this other part, this part that poetry and music kind of sneaks in, and I turn off my assessment and I get to experience the way that tones and notes or Mary Oliver's poetic language opens me. Sometimes it can be uncomfortable because it opens us in a way that is different, but I'll never forget those experiences, like when I was 16 years old and I had the opportunity to go to my very first Broadway musical that came to the Twin Cities. My choir went to it, and the only ticket I could afford was in the very back row. It was *Beauty And The Beast* and I sat there crying and I thought, "Oh, I hope someday someone will love me." And I have a few more complicated thoughts about the storyline of *Beauty And The Beast*, but how about you?

Maybe it was a concert you went to when you were 18. Maybe it was The Rolling Stones. Maybe it was singing with a choir in one of the beautiful cathedrals in Europe. Maybe it's been Easter mornings here in this space as the shutters open and the bells ring and the choir sings, Hallelujah. And you know, in your bones that indeed Christ is risen! This is the wonder and the power and the beauty of music. It opens us to a new way into gratitude, to indeed being able to live thanks.

We're oftentimes, indeed, because of worry or fear or just life, we can begin to clench our fists journeying through lands that feel unsafe, and suddenly you're back, listening to your favorite music and you notice, "Oh my hands have unfurled a little bit!" Indeed, in so many ways, I think that's part of the invitation, the remembrance of the book of Chronicles. There's actually two of them. Here in 1st Chronicles, this is the accounting of the people of Israel.



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The story that's happening here and its placement in the Hebrew Bible is something I want us to pay attention to. The books of Chronicles followed the very end of the organization of the Hebrew Bible. So to the very, very end, in our gathering in the Christian Bible, it doesn't feature in that same place, right? If you had to do any of the Bible drills when you were growing up, you know it's not at the end, right? It's not right before Matthew, it's in the middle. But in the Hebrew Bible, it's at the very end. And the reason for that is that first and second Chronicles, in some ways, as a commentator noted, it's like a grand opera. It's the retelling to the community who has come back from exile to remind them of the long Ark and the story of who God is, how God has been faithful to Israel and how God will continue to be faithful to them, going forward.

And so here in this chapter in Chronicles, we're reminded of the story, of when the people who had been wandering about in the desert, they had this place finally for the Ark of the covenant, where got to rest and to reside. And imagine if you will, for a moment, thinking of that close fist imagery, you're a people who've been wandering around. You haven't had a steady place and yes, God is continuing to provide for you, but it's been liminal. I'm sure it's been really hard. You want a home, you want somewhere to rest. And so now they have this place, the tabernacle where they're going to be able to worship God, have the Ark of the Covenant. And in this space, David appoints someone to lead the worship, and they give thanks to God. Maybe some of you, as you heard Cheryl reading the verses, we're reminded of song versions of this passage. Sing praise, sing praise. That's what comes to mind for me.

Here in this passage, it's actually a recollection of other Psalms, a reminder to the people, of songs that they knew and that they sung in worship prior to, and during the exile. It's being recounted here for them that, "Hey, remember these songs. They've been part of your history and your lineage." In Spotify, I actually have my own playlist. It's called my list. Very original. And in it, I have played songs that have been meaningful for me at moments throughout my life. And when I re-listen to those songs, I can remember precisely what was happening at that minute. When I listen to Jennifer Knapp, I remember being a sophomore in college crying. These songs have been part of my story. You have songs and experiences that are part of yours. And the people of Israel had songs and worship that was a part of theirs. And here the chronicler is reminding them of the God who had been faithful to them throughout the ages and the songs that they sang, even when they were in exile.

They give thanks to God remembering the works God has done, remembering the songs of freedom and life that have been part of their own community.

One of the reasons I wanted to highlight though, that this is at the end of the Hebrew Bible, is that what happens next is a period of silence. A period, the intertestamental period, we call it, where things went quiet for them, when indeed, the people of Israel had built the temple and they rebuilt the temple, and they end up on a Roman occupation. And then we come to the stories of the gospels. Some of you may recall



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the tale that happens when Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well, right? In that story, what happens is she says to him, "Jesus, your ancestors worshipped here on this mountain, my ancestors worship here." And Jesus says to her, "The time is coming and is now at hand when the true worshipers will worship in spirit and in truth." I love this passage. It's one of my favorites for a lot of reasons.

But today, what I wanted to highlight is a sense of what happens here, is the people are being reminded of the story of what happened when they came out of wandering, had a tabernacle where they could put the covenant, that covenant then, and the Ark of Covenant became a temple. And then the people they experienced all this hardship and pain. And then at this moment, when Jesus shows up on the scene, she's saying, "You worship here, you worship there. We're trying to fortify and clench our fists again." And Jesus says, "The true worshipers worship in spirit and in truth." Because that's what these songs and these remembrances are supposed to do. They're not about, ensconcing a temple worship, where now we have everything and it's all controlled. They're about opening us up to the God who is with the people of Israel as they journeyed, who has been with them as they were in exile. And the God who was with them in silence is the same God who is with us this day.

And so whether we worship in buildings or whether you love going to the opera or whether you can't wait, like I can, when Broadway opens again and you're going to go see Six, the musical, which I highly recommend... these are all those remembrances that God is never contained, not by our buildings, not by our rational minds, but God is always inviting and opening us up to remember that we are alive, to remember that all is a gift, to remember that no matter how dark the night, we are not alone. God invites us to sing songs and move with God's spirit into the rhythm and dances of how God's wind blows. And I know for some of us, this is profoundly uncomfortable, right? Some of you are like, "Poetry, I don't understand what it means. What is this even about?" That's fine.

I bet you might like maybe a musician or maybe you like worship here in the church, but how is God inviting you and inviting us, to continue through living art and beauty and music, to open ourselves to live things, to open our hands, to pause in wonder, and to look around remembering that all of this is a gift! It's my prayer, and it's our prayer, that we will be a community that lives thanks, who sings songs of praise, whose music of our movement with God's Spirit's rhythm is an orchestra of life in the world. That whether you are an oboe or a clarinet or a cello, whatever piece you are in the symphony, that we would show up together, take our instruments and play music of thanks that brings life.

For those of you who have continued to endeavor to open us up to God's spirit through music, even during COVID, we give you thanks. May we continue to live thanks and sing along with the chronicler and the people of Israel.

We give you thanks, Lord. We call on your name. We seek you. We remember your



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Sermon by Sara Wilhelm Garbers
Senior Associate Minister
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works and your miracles. We remember your covenant forever, as we sing and live thanks, together. Amen.



What About Us?

Galatians 1:1-9

Paul, an apostle sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead and all of the members of God's family who are with me. To the churches of Galatia: Grace to you and peace from our God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel - not that there is a different gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaim to you, let that one be accursed. As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed. Galatians 1:1-9

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Well, happy Fourth of July to all of you. So grateful to be in worship with you this morning and so excited to be able to continue our sermon series that we're studying this summer: Letters From a Friend. Over this summer, we're spending some intentional time looking at New Testament letters.

One of the things I love about these letters is that they were written to communities. Now, as a millennial, I don't have as many letters as some of you might have that you've stored away over the years! I do know the form of them though, and how they're supposed to go. Generally, there is a greeting. Then you have the initial comments, the body of what you want to say, a salutation and a sign off. And then possibly a post script or P.S. Of course, we do many of these same things in email except often we simplify by saying, Hey, do that, sign, bye! Right? But these letters, were written by people who didn't have the Internet, who didn't have many forms of communication, would gather around, would share and pass between one another the words that came from a friend, from a leader and together as community, they'd be shaped by these letters and these stories.

Even though our time is far removed from theirs, in some ways it's not that different. We are still a people who are shaped by stories, who gather around listening for words that invite us to live. And on this day we remember letters of many times about this nation, about who we're called to be. So as we gather around this letter to the people of Galatia, will you join me in prayer?

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God of all love, we thank you that you have written letters through human hands throughout history. We pray that this morning that whatever the letters are that we need to hear, that we would receive it as an invitation of a friend. We give you thanks that you are the God of all freedom, the God of all of us. Might your freedom and your good news be that which changes and transforms us. In your name, Amen.

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Now one of the things about the New Testament letters is that they are their own particular genre in the Bible. There are different kinds of books in the Bible. Jeff read from a Psalm that was part of the liturgy of worship for the community. There are historical books in the Bible but the letters are just that. They literally were letters. Letters written to a specific people in a specific place. Jeff is focusing on Philippians; and others are preaching on other letters; my four Sundays will focus on Galatians, the letter that Paul wrote to the people in Galatia.

Now here's the thing about these letters. If you take a look at them -- and some of you know this -- but if you take a look at the beginning of these letters, the form of letters at that time was to start with a greeting, "To the people in Galatia." In case you're in a different place, this wasn't for you. It was who it was addressed to and then in the greeting it lets you know something about what the author thinks about the community, wants to tell the community and maybe that they might not be super happy with the community.

In this case in Galatians what you'll note is the initial intro "Paul, an apostle." So it's from Paul -- that is who we know it's coming from.

The next thing that happens is Paul's establishing his authority. He starts off the letter by letting them know, "Hey, I'm Paul. I'm not here because of anyone else. There's no human who said, Paul, he's the guy you should listen to." He's saying "I am here and I'm writing you by God's commission. That's my authority." That's important.

He doesn't reference that at the beginning of each of his letters. Not in all the letters does he do a power move. Any of you ever had to do that in a meeting where you feel the need to remark, "Remember I'm the boss?" That's what he's doing here, but according to God.

To the churches in Galatia, (that's the community) grace and peace to you. So He does include a nice 'grace and peace to you' section; that's good.

Paul reminds them of how they're "gathered together in the Lord Jesus Christ, according to the will of God. Amen." We've only gotten a few verses and that's the end of the salutation.

If you go to Philippians, it's a lot more verbose. 'Oh, Philippians, I love you Philippians. This is just so wonderful. You bring me such joy.' Paul doesn't do that here. Paul gets

right into the heart of his letter. The heart of what he is writing to the people of Galatians about is that he believes that they have deserted the gospel and he's really concerned about it. No! Only a few words. No niceties. He says, 'Here's the deal. You've turned to another gospel.' There actually isn't another gospel he says, and that is what he's going to be writing to them about in these next chapters.

So whenever you read one of the New Testament letters, look at the beginning and you can tell is Paul mad? Is Paul happy? Is Paul going to write them a nice thing or is this going to be a little bit more touch and go? This letter is decidedly prophetic. It's challenging. It's invitational. So, what is going on here?



Galatia was a region. Down in the bottom right-hand corner you can see where Jerusalem and Judea -- still present day. And then up through Syria, you see that kind of teal color up near the Black Sea? That's where Galatia was -- part of the Roman Empire, part of Asia Minor. And it's not to just one community. It's not to just one city. It's to a people in that region that Paul is writing.

Now, Paul had gone to Galatia before as part of one of his missionary journeys. You can read more about this in the book of Acts chapters 13, 14, 16 and 18.

This text is, in part, reminding the people of Galatia who they are -- the gospel that was preached to them. But this letter is included in the Christian canon of the Bible as a defense of the Gentile mission, because the earliest church, rightly so, was filled with Jewish people. Jesus was Jewish. The communities who were transformed by the message of Jesus were Jewish people. But the people who lived in Galatia were not just a bunch of Jewish people. The people who lived there were Roman citizens or not, but they were Gentiles. And this struggle in the early church was one that they wrestled with many times.

You will also see this in Acts 15. It'll appear in more depth in Galatians 2 if you want to read it yourself this week. There is a struggle going on. The church is wrestling with its identity. Will this be a church that is primarily Jewish first following Jesus? Or will this be a church that following Jesus means you can be Jewish; you can be Gentile; you can be male or female; you can be slave or free. Anyone. You may remember

what happens later in Galatia where Paul writes, "For I tell you, there is neither male nor female, slave nor free, Gentile or Jew." That's the heart of what's going on. Paul is writing into the midst of a community that is wrestling. Is the gospel bound by cultural identity? do you have to be Jewish to be Christian? or is the thing that makes us Christian not our ethnicity, but Jesus?

Paul in his very subtle way (that's a joke), lets the people of Galatia know there is only one answer to that. The answer is that to follow Christ means we come as who we are, with all of our stories, with all our backgrounds and identities. Not that those disappear but that they are reduced in importance... that the power struggles that happen in general cultural warfare are erased because the only thing that matters is Christ. It is for freedom in our own skin, in our own bodies, as who we are. It's for freedom that we have been called and it is for freedom that we have been set free. And so Paul writes to the church and says, 'No, you don't get to make someone else become Jewish in order to become Christian. You just bring Christ and we come as who we are.'

Some of you may recall the struggle. Peter really wrestled with this. He and Paul went head to head about it.

In Acts 10 you may remember that Peter had a dream. In the dream food comes down on a sheet and it's stuff that he wouldn't have eaten as a Jewish person. I don't really think they had hot dogs and buns or pizza in the same way then. Maybe they had lobsters, I don't know. But anyway, he has this dream and he says, "No, Lord, not me. I will not eat anything that's unclean." And then in the dream God said to him "Don't call unclean anything that God has made clean." So part of what's going on in this letter is that Paul is challenging his brother Peter.



And he's saying, "Peter, do you remember your dream? Remember the wrestling we've been having? Remember the gospel?" Because what has happened is Peter is a part of the group that is arguing that in order to be Christian you need to follow Jewish laws and customs. Peter has now quit having table fellowship. He's quit doing communion and gathering in the homes of Gentiles. And Paul says, this is not okay. This is not the gospel. Jesus has made the gospel accessible to everyone.

Now, one of the things that I love about this passage and about the book of Galatians and what I have enjoyed about re-studying it, is seeking to understand it on its own terms.

This is a particular moment in the history of the church that Paul is writing about... and sometimes what's happened in the history of interpretation in the Christian church -- we lose that historical context. Galatians has sometimes been employed in anti-Jewish tropes, right? 'Don't be like those Judaizers, those law people.' That's not



the point of what he's arguing for. He's not trying to argue against Jewish people; Paul is arguing for freedom. He's communicating again -- however you come, that is the freedom that Christ has called all of us to walk in and journey in as a community.

I think, one of the important things in reading the Bible is that we seek to understand it first on its own terms. This is important in human communication as well. If I seek to understand you just on my terms and don't try to hear you on yours. I generally miss some things. And likewise, as we come to this text, we seek to understand its invitation and then from that place apply it to us today. So even though we're reading this text on the 4th of July, Paul isn't writing to America, but we're reading it as people who are Americans in our context on the 4th of July. Paul here is writing about a perennial human struggle that is also a struggle of the church. It is a struggle of humans in general, which is this. Even as we experience the beauty of whether it's the gospel of freedom in Christ, whether we believe in the ideals of freedom as a nation, whatever it is, that the human propensity is to judge the experiences we have according to our own.

So of course I want to be free, but I want you to be free if you're like me. And sometimes we forget that there are other people who aren't exactly like us and to whom that freedom is also extended. That is the struggle in this earliest church. The church got stuck thinking that Jewish identity mattered more than the freedom in Christ. So become Jewish and then you can be Christian.

Paul says, 'No, that's not how it works. Freedom doesn't get to be confined to one group of people.'

Let me say more about this. Today is the 4th of July (in case you haven't been paying attention yet). I wore my outfit today to help you remember!

Today's the day we celebrate the birth of America. We celebrate independence.

We celebrate the ideals and the best dreams of what our nation has been and can be. In the Declaration of Independence -- you may recall the beautiful words, true words -- it says that "all men are created equal."

It was a beautiful and true ideal that so many of our founders did agree to and aspire to live. And yet, as we also know, some of our founders owned slaves. People of my gender were not guaranteed the right to vote until the early 20th century. That doesn't mean that the ideal was wrong. It just means that as humans we profess ideals and we sometimes forget to fully live into them.

And Paul's letter to the church in Galatia says live into them. It is for freedom that we have been set free. This is the good news! The good news cannot be constrained. Freedom isn't just for this group, it's for all of us. This is good news that in our own skin, in our own bodies, we get to live the story of freedom. The letter of Galatians serves as a prophetic reminder to us who gather in worship this day as well, that any time we limit that freedom, we've lost sight of the power and embraced a gospel that is actually no gospel at all.

We need to look no further than -- some of you have heard about -- the Museum of the Bible which has a copy of a Bible known as the Bible for the Negro slaves. You'll note it has select parts of the Holy Bible. That's because the people who put this Bible together while professing the name Jesus, cut out any references to freedom, any references to the Exodus of the Hebrew slaves into the Promised Land because they didn't want to give enslaved persons in the United States the idea, the salacious idea, the deviant idea that maybe in Jesus Christ, they might want to be free. They missed the fullness of the gospel and they tried to limit it.

This is what happens in those moments when we lose sight of the gospel. We've done that over and over in our history. And it's just human nature. It's nothing out of the ordinary. I do this all the time. I profess ideals and I don't fully live into it.

But Galatians reminds us that the call of Christ continues to push us by the Spirit to live freedom, to live the gospel, to remind and challenge each other that when we go silent, that when we forget table fellowship, we've forgotten the beauty and the power of the gospel. Just these last weeks in the news, we've seen the legacy and the impact of when this goes sideways. Stuff like the number of boarding schools in the United States where kids from native families were taken from their families. Parts of this were well-intentioned, parts of it weren't.

I don't know all the people who were involved, but either way it's a sense that in order to follow Christ, you have to look a certain way. But the good news of Jesus Christ is something that's able to go around the world throughout all cultures, in all languages. And can we not trust the power of the gospel that Jesus can figure out how to translate? One of my favorite things that Jeff shared sometime earlier... Some you've heard me tell this story before ... one of you (I don't know who; Jeff's never outed the person who said this) "You know, I like that new minister but I wish she would get rid of her nose ring." And Jeff said, "Well, what are you going to do? Young people are going to do what they're going to do." And that was such a generous example that you and I are not the same person. Everyone knows that. And yet we both love Jesus.

And what does it mean for you to worship Jesus in your skin and for me to do it in mine? And for us then as people of all tribes and tongues and generations and street addresses, to be able to proclaim the good news that it is 'for freedom that we have been set free.' Paul here in the book of Galatians reminds and challenges the church. He says, "I have been entrusted with the gospel of the uncircumcised." That was his calling. And he's reminding his church, the church at the time that, yes, the way that the gospel is translated looks all sorts of different ways but at its heart and at its core is freedom for everyone.

You know, as I was reading the book of Galatians, I was reminded of one of my favorite songs. I'm presuming not everyone here has this as one of *their* favorite songs. Anyone like this song or know what it is? ***What About Us?*** I think that this song is the anthem of the book of Galatians. I don't think that Pink, the music artist knew that that was the anthem of her song when she was writing it and I don't think she



thought, "Hey, the book of Galatians. It's totally what I'm writing about." And yet when I read the book of Galatians, I think about this song.

Some of the lyrics say

We are searchlights.

We can see in the dark.

We are rockets pointed up at the stars.

We are billions of beautiful hearts

and you sold us down the river too far.

I think of Paul writing that to the church in Jerusalem and the Jewish Christians who were saying you needed to become Jewish to follow Jesus.

What about us?

What about the Gentile Christians?

What about all the times you said you had the answers?

Because the good news had been carried through the people of promise, through the Jewish people. But what about us? Is the gospel extend to people in 2021 in the Americas who were never dreamed of by the church at that time? What about all those plans that ended in disaster? Remember, Jesus got killed. Remember, we're not living the gospel. What about us?

And Paul into that space inserts and reminds them, indeed as I referenced from Galatians chapter three... there is no longer Jew or Greek. There is no longer slave or free, male nor female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring and heirs according to his promise.

Again, not that we cease to be who we are, but the good news of Galatians and the good news of the gospel is we come as who we are. We are welcomed as who we are and we are all set free in the love of Christ, in that good news, to be a people of freedom.

Every time we limit that freedom, I believe we inhibit the gospel. Every time we decide that this people or this group isn't included, that's not ours to decide. Our role is to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, that God has come and in Christ the radical love of Jesus is for everyone. And that there is freedom from the things that burden us, and the ways that the ego lets us forget each other. That is what we have been called for. And every time we expect the gospel to look just like us, we miss the point.

One of the things I have loved about this community is... and I think this is true anywhere ... that no dream is just some new dream. We all carry within us the best of the dreams of our elders. You, of your parents and your grandparents. Us of the dreams of this people and of our country. I have five relatives who were on the Mayflower. They had dreams of what could be and hopes and longings and we carry those stories in us even as those dreams look different. But that doesn't erase each other's dreams. It just means that the Spirit is still moving. It means God is not done with us yet. It means that the freedom of Christ continues and whenever we go silent,



whenever we turn away from the table fellowship, we miss the power and the joy of the gospel.

This is a gospel of freedom. The gospel of freedom in Jesus Christ is for all of us.

It's a good news that challenges. It's a good news that inspires us.

May we never lose sight of it. It is for freedom that we have been set free. It is for the freedom of all of us and as our founders would remind us at their best. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all of us formed in the image of the God of life and freedom, we are all equal. And so in some ways on this communion Sunday, I imagine the church in Galatia gathered around a letter -- their little letter. Gathered around their letter, they are huddled in a house or maybe in the town square and someone is reading aloud to them the letter that came from Paul.

To the churches in Galatia. They gather around. And I imagine them gathered around with their communion cup, being challenged and reminded that it's for freedom that they have been set free. Do any of you know the song?

"Raise a glass to freedom,
something they can never take away, no matter what they tell you.
Raise a glass to all of us.
Tomorrow there'll be more of us telling the story of tonight."

And that community gathered around that letter was transformed by the challenge from Paul to be a people of freedom. So indeed, on this day, as people who follow Jesus and are citizens of heaven who are also citizens of this country, might we be a people who let freedom ring.

Let us pray together. A prayer based on Galatians 5 written by Cathy Colway.

Forgive us, O God, for how easily we forget that freedom in Christ binds us to love both enemy and neighbor and calls us to welcome the stranger among us. We too easily fall into the trap of assuming our side is right and we have a lock on grace for this world. Centered in our righteousness, we believe it's our right to cast out others with angry words, with the silences we keep. We harm others in the name of freedom. But remind us, O God, this day that the true freedom in Christ binds us to one another. In the things we have done in the name of independence, for that which we have left undone, forgive us. Bind our hearts once again to our neighbor that we might live freedom. Reconcile us together in the freedom of Christ once again. Remind us, O Lord, that there is no longer Greek or Jew, male or female, but all of us are one in Christ. Might we live this freedom and might we be people of your good news in this world. Amen.

Live Toward God

Galatians 2:19-3:3

For through the law, I died to the law so that I might live to God. I've been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live, but it's Christ who lives within me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God. For if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing. You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified. The only thing I want to learn from you is this. Did you receive the Spirit by doing the works of the law or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? Galatians 2:19-3:3

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Good morning. It's so good to be with you all this morning in worship. I'm really excited because we're back in the book of Galatians today. So yay! As we turn to continue our worship through exploring the text, will you pray with me?

God of all love and all life, we give you thanks this morning for the reminder, the reminder of your goodness, of your love, and of your presence with us. Might we indeed turn our faces and our whole selves toward you. For it's in your name that we gather and live. Amen.

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We are in the middle of a sermon series this summer called "Letters From a Friend." In this series, we're exploring some of the New Testament letters that were written to the early church. Letters literally penned to communities, almost like those blessedly wonderful chain emails that people like to cc: others on and then send them to everyone in their entire contact list...most of us have gotten better at not doing that anymore, correct?! Yes. Okay, good, good!

Well, these letters were a little better than those chain emails...a lot better, in fact, because it was an encouragement written to the early church about who they were called to be, what they were about, and what God was doing in their midst. You've been able to hear from Jeff on the book of Philippians, you've heard from Mark, you've heard from Christian, and you've heard from me on Galatians, as a way of digging into some of the letters. We named this series "Letters From a Friend," because indeed, the letters are a reminder that the relational component is central to

these texts: They aren't just ancient books...no, they were actual letters written to actual people in actual places

The book of Galatians was written to the people in the region of Galatia. It wasn't like some of the other New Testament letters that were written to a church in a specific town. As you can see from the map, Galatia is part of Asia where Paul took some of his missionary journeys and had brought the Gospel to these places. And in this letter, he wrote to the people throughout this area to remind them of the Gospel that had been preached to them and in which they had believed.

Each of the New Testament letters start differently. So, if you ever want to do a fun exercise, open your Bible, go to the New Testament letters. They come after the Gospels (so Matthew, Mark, Luke, John). Just keep going and you'll find them. They're in there! You can Google letters New Testament, you'll figure out which ones they are. When you get to the beginning of each of these letters, you'll note very clearly that the particular writer has particular feelings about the particular community. Some of them, like Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, is overflowing with joy. The folks in Philippi, they are nailing it. They are living out the Gospel. They are full of faith and life and energy, and Paul is encouraged by them and he's writing to encourage them.

Now, when you go to a letter like Galatians, as I spoke about last time, you'll see Paul's not quite as effusive in his warmth. That's an understatement. If you don't believe me, reopen the book of Galatians and you can start there. What's happening in the book of Galatians, again, as a reminder for some of us, is that Paul is writing to this community that is distributed, trying to remind them of the Gospel because he's really concerned. He's concerned that the people spread throughout the region have lost sight of the Gospel that was preached to them.

Part of what's been going on in this community is that there is an inner struggle about what it means to be Christian. And in the early church, they're wrestling with questions of identity, with culture, and with this new thing that is happening in their midst. Some of the new Christian leadership is arguing that in order to be Christian, you need to become Jewish. If you're a man, you need to get circumcised. And so, for them, they're saying, this is what it looks like to be culturally Jewish, to follow in the ways and the practices that are familiar to us. And Paul, in his very docile, very quiet way... (FYI- that's extreme sarcasm, if you haven't read Galatians, just so you know. He's not particularly docile or sweet in this letter!).

Paul essentially writes to say, "What are you doing?" He basically is yelling at them through this letter, and he is saying, "What are you doing? Are you serious? This is actually a thing of freedom for you." Because as it turns out, the people distributed through Galatia weren't all from Jerusalem and weren't all Jewish. And he was saying, "Listen, it's actually that you encountered Christ in your own skin and your own story. Don't quit being who God made you to be and following Christ in the midst of your story."

Now, in order to make this argument, Paul spends verse upon verse throughout the first and second chapters establishing his authority. This is the equivalent of a letter smack down: "I have authority. No, I have more!" He goes through the first two chapters arguing initially for what's the center of the Gospel. And then he's tells them, "Here's why I have authority. Here's why you should listen to me. Here's what's important." He's talking to them about the apostolic tradition, in so many words, naming how he was encountered by Christ on the road to Damascus, which gives him authority and how he was entrusted with the Gospel to preach it to the "uncircumcised."

As we get to the end of chapter two, Paul's beginning to get to the center of the conflict that's happening within the Christian church at this time. He's saying that indeed, there are some Jewish Christians who are refusing to have fellowship, to eat with folks who aren't Jewish. He's noting how Peter, who's the rock on which Christ built the church (so a pretty faithful guy), how Peter himself has lost sight of what the Gospel is about. That's what Paul is saying, (again, in his very nice language): that Peter has become cowardly. And because he doesn't want folks to be upset, he also is not doing table fellowship with any of the Gentiles. And Paul comes directly at them to say, "What are you doing, people? It's for freedom that you've been set free!" This is a major theme of Galatians: It's for freedom. Freedom in your own skin, in your own story. You don't have to be someone else to come to Christ. You already are there. What are you doing? Just be yourself and live the freedom of the gospel!

Paul calls to them: "let's all let each other be free to be exactly who we are, and to follow this God in this freedom that we have known in Christ. For we are justified, not through the law or adherence to it, not through making sure we all wear the same button-downs and have the same yards. We are justified because of who Christ is and that we are people formed in God's image. And now, through the law of love, we get to live!" All Paul is saying to the Galatians is: "Choose life. Choose freedom!"

Now, of course, most of us would say, "Well, of course I want that choice. I'm going to choose freedom. I'm going to choose life." Now, if any of you have ever done some work to get free in your life, you might know that sometimes, freedom actually takes a lot of work. We have our stories. Some of the demons that have haunted us. And to actually slog through that can take a lifetime. And sometimes you just want to tap out and say, "No, really Paul. I know freedom's a nice concept and everything, but can you just give me the list of how I'm a good Christian? Because that would really help me a lot." Maybe none of you ever feel that way, but thank you at least for a few murmurs of laughter to make me feel not alone. So Paul is trying to encourage them and say: "I know in one way, this is hard. But in another way, this is the most beautiful, wonderful gift any of us could ever receive. Let's just take it and live it, folks!" That's essentially what he's arguing in Galatians.

In receiving this letter from a friend, our friend, Paul, I wanted to turn to two of my friends to talk about what it means to live toward God, as our passage for today names. As it reads in verse 19: "For though I live... For through the law, I died to the

law. That is difficult. So that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”

The two friends I'd like to turn to, one is a poet named Joy Harjo, and the other is one of my oldest and dearest friends, Rosita. What I'd like to do is invite you to listen to the first stanza from a poem from Joy Harjo that I believe resonates with a lot of Paul's message. This is called “Eagle Poem.”

To pray you open your whole self
To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon
To one whole voice that is you.
And know there is more
That you can't see, can't hear;
Can't know except in moments
Steadily growing, and in languages
That aren't always sound but other
Circles of motion.

Rosita Guadalupe Acevedo became my friend my sophomore year of college. At the time you wouldn't find two people who are much more different than us. She was quiet and wore black and navy and white and tan all the time whereas when I was in college, I wore hot pink and did my hair as large as I could and knew everyone on campus. But through a process of doing dorm ministry together, we built a deep friendship. Two weeks ago we had the opportunity to celebrate her birthday, and we did a road trip together through New England. We began our time by visiting Salem, Massachusetts.

Salem was founded by the Pilgrims in the space after they came to this country, signed the Mayflower Compact, and began to populate and live out their faith in this new land. In many ways, these early days of the Pilgrim migration reminds me of the church spread throughout Galatia, the early church, wrestling as Christians have wrestled throughout history with questions of identity and freedom and meaning.

We visited Salem, Massachusetts because I wanted to remember the part of the story of what happens when we get stuck when we start locking ourselves and one another up in chains being bound not by freedom. And so we went to Salem, Massachusetts, and spent time at the memorials for those who were killed during the Salem Witch Trials. If you visit Salem today there's all sorts of kitschy witch shops (though the people who were killed at that time weren't witches but rather were those more on the margins of society, those who brought up fear for the community and some were merely very opinionated women. Needless to say: I'm glad I wasn't alive then).

But going there was a reminder, thinking of this book of Galatians and this letter, are we living stories of freedom? Are we living toward God? And what happens when at times we get stuck? That's the reminder here that Paul is giving the church. To live

toward God. To be a people who persist in being open and being reopened, who don't allow ourselves to get afraid or to get small, or to put in place new legalisms that we hold one another to, or places of judgment. But we allow each other to live in freedom and be who we are.

Now here, interestingly, in the end of chapter two, Paul brings up a theme that goes throughout a lot of his letters, where he takes flesh and spirit and contrasts them with one another. But if you remember from what was read for us, he says, "But the life I live in the flesh, I live in faith in the Son of God." Most of the time throughout Paul's letters, flesh is more about ego and the ways that aren't alive to the way of faith. But here he said, "I live in Christ, and therefore, the life I live in my body is actually lived not from a place of centric ego, but of a flesh of an ego of a self who is rooted in Christ. And that opens me up to live in an entirely different way," which he then contrasts with the way of the flesh that he talks about in chapter three. A flesh that is all about self. That's about power, about control, and he challenges the church to live freedom. Again, from Joy Harjo, the second part of "Eagle Poem:"

Like eagle that Sunday morning
Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky
In wind, swept our hearts clean
With sacred wings.
We see you, see ourselves and know
That we must take the utmost care
And kindness in all things.

Transitioning, then to chapter three, verses one through three. Paul, again, in his very sweet and docile language, says "You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?" Now again, the Galatians aren't alone. This is super normal, very human stuff, right? "For before your eyes," he says to them, "Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified." And he's challenging them to say, so remind me exactly what happened for you. Wasn't it through the Spirit that you came to faith? Did you start there? Are you now going to go back to trying to control and have power and forget all of the things of freedom and life that Christ has called you to? Center to what Paul is saying here is, please don't. Don't do that. Don't forget that to which you were called, and the life and the freedom to which you are invited. Live free. Live toward God and let that orientation transform and change who you are.

Our final leg of the journey ended in Provincetown, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod. I had never been to Provincetown before and didn't know a lot of its story. It was just this last year I found out that five of my own family members had come across the water on the Mayflower. I didn't know that because I was raised in my Swedish family, which only came to the United States two generations ago. So it was interesting for me to be able to go to this place that I didn't know was significant in the Pilgrim account. I had long heard of Plymouth and Plymouth Rock, but I didn't know that Provincetown and Provincetown Harbor is actually where the Pilgrims first

landed and the Mayflower Compact was signed.

Some of you may already know this history and may also know that since the late 1800s Provincetown has been a haven for artists and a safe space particularly for gay men. When Rosita and I went to Provincetown, and walked up and down the streets, it was filled with people in a way that I hadn't seen since before COVID. There was so much freedom and beauty and celebration in the way that communities in enclaves like this only can hold. And I was reflecting again about this call to live toward God, and what it means that we are invited to be a people who live freedom. And I was thinking about my own generational story and the story of Christianity throughout history. I was reminded of how the first Sunday I came to preach here, I had a sense that I carried in my story the generations of congregational women, including those who were killed in Salem in my story and that in coming here to this congregational community I was getting to experience freedom in my skin to live the Gospel in a way that those killed in Salem hadn't.

And that day, walking down the pier in Provincetown with one of my dearest friends in the whole world, as the sun was setting, I had this deep sense of God saying, "Sara, this is what the kingdom looks like." Because you see, just two days before that, I'd found out that after over two years of trying to get pregnant again, having lived through miscarriage and two years plus of infertility, having found out that my dearly wonderful spouse had 0% of the things that help women to have babies were working. We didn't think we were going to be able to get pregnant, and that may indeed have been our story. But we found out that we were, and we had found out the very week I was traveling out East with Rosita that the genetics assessments had come back positive for low risk. And we had found out that we were pregnant with a baby whose sex was female. Thanks. Thank you.

For me, though, part of what this was about, when I say I was walking the streets and realized it was the kingdom of heaven, having walked though the streets where indeed, some of my ancestors had actually been, and then had lived a complicated and at times profoundly problematic, at times beautiful legacy, just like the church in Galatia's living, that I was getting to have the opportunity in my life to continue to explore what freedom and what it means to live toward God. Because for generations in my family, women got married because they were pregnant beforehand. They lived in relationships in which they weren't seen. Women throughout the story of even congregationalism weren't always allowed to do what I am doing today. But that day, I got to put my hands on my belly and say to that human, "Whoever you are and whoever you will become, I want you to know that I will love you."

That is part of the legacy of this story. That we are called to be a people who, as we turn ourselves toward God, that that healing comes, that the freedom comes in our own skin. And then we get to walk the streets with one another and proclaim that this is a freedom for every person in every skin of every tribe and every tongue and everybody, because it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. That freedom didn't

begin or end when people landed on this country and it doesn't end today. It didn't end in Galatians, and Paul today echoes forth a word to us that says: "open our whole selves to the Gospel of freedom!" And might we be a people, then, who now live toward Christ.

A final word, then, from Joy Harjo's "Eagle Poem:"

Breathe in, knowing we are made of
All this, and breathe, knowing
We are truly blessed because we
Were born, and die soon within a
True circle of motion,
Like eagle rounding out the morning
Inside us.
We pray that it will be done
In beauty.
In beauty.

Indeed, may the beauty of the Good News of the freedom of Christ be that which animates every fiber of our beings so that in your skin and in mine, we you live toward God, and we live the Gospel of freedom as Paul invites, dear friends.

Let us pray together.

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Indeed, God, may it no longer be us who live in ways with our hands clenched, but may it be us opening our whole selves so that Christ might live in and through us. That we might be a people who live this love, who remember it is to freedom that we have been called and set free. And might we join with you in the movement of your Spirit, that all might know freedom, that all might know this joy and peace and beauty. For it's in Christ's name that we live and move and breathe. Amen.

When Faith Came Galatians 3:23-29

Now, before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore, the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus, you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek. There is no longer slave or free. There is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise, the word of God for the people of God. Galatians 3:23-29

Well, good morning. It's good to see you all, whether in person or virtually this morning. As we continue in worship and turn to this letter from our friend Paul, will you pray with me.

God of all light and life, may we know the faith that both came and continues to come in Christ. God, may that faith be something not that we just affirm with our lips, but God, may it be something that by your spirit and your love, it changes and transforms us and our whole world. For it's in Christ's name we gather. Amen.

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Well, if you've been paying attention at all, even just to the bulletin you received for worship today, then you would know that this summer we are in the midst of a sermon series entitled Letters From a Friend and in it we are exploring some New Testament letters that were written to the early church. If you've heard more than one sermon, you've gotten to hear some different letters that were written such as Paul's letter to the Philippian church, a city that Paul was thrilled to see the ways that they were living and embracing the gospel. You've heard a little bit from Romans for chance and the love of God and Christ that changes everything. And if you've heard any of mine, you've gotten to hear the positive uplifting message from Paul to the church spread throughout the area of Glacia.

Now Glacia wasn't just a town or a city, it was actually a region. And this was part of Paul's missionary journeys that he had gone on. What's been happening in Galatians in the letter, just in case you haven't been around for a recap, in case you've had other thoughts you've considered since my last sermon (I sometimes forget my last sermon) so I'll remind you and myself. We start off the letter, and as happens in all of the letters, at the very beginning you get a sense of what the author is wanting to communicate to the group who's reading it. You get to know if they're excited, if they have criticism, all of what's happening. And early in the letter to the Galatians,

Paul is letting them know he is just a little disappointed in them. That is sarcasm. He is very disappointed in them and he's actually really, it's not even just them though, he's actually writing a letter that he knows will be shared and spread throughout the Christian Church at the time.

His central concern is that he believes that the gospel of Jesus Christ is under threat. And it's under threat, not from outside, but from within... the reason being, because humans are going to human, as I like to say, sometimes, meaning we're imperfect and we have stuff. And in the early church, just like us, they also had some issues. One of the struggles that this church had was what to do with the fact that the gospel of Jesus Christ was spreading to the Gentiles and that the way the power and the centralization of how religious influence had happened, it was getting messed with. Now, some of you are more routine than others, right? Like someone comes and sits in your place in church and you're like, you're messing with my stuff. Maybe none of you think that ever, but this is on a more intense scale.

What's happening in the church is that the church in Jerusalem has begun to say, really, the way that you need to be part of the church is to enter in through Jewish identity. If you're male, you need to be circumcised.

So Paul comes in and he says in this letter, stop it! Jesus didn't come just for one group of people. Jesus, as God incarnate invaded and came to earth to change everything, that the promise that was given back in Genesis, which is referred to here in Genesis 12 and 15, where God says to Abraham, the promise will be for all of the nations, that your descendants will be like the stars. It wasn't that the stars all had to become Jewish, it was that the stars would be as beautiful and diverse as God's creative imagination. And in Christ, we would get to live that together.

Paul wants this church to remember that, to remember when faith came and everything changed.

That wasn't so long ago, although in the pictures you'll see in a minute, you will think it's 500 years ago that Andy Garbers and I got married. As we came down the aisle, I, not surprisingly in my proclivity to analyze most everything in the entire planet, decided that the way that we would enter into our wedding ceremony was through two aisles because each of us were important in the ceremony and each of us brought our stories. So first came in Andy escorted by his family who had birthed and carried him up to that day, his time, and that was represented as act one. Then act two was when our collective community came down the separate aisles, each representing parts of our own story and our lives. And then act three because I couldn't resist a little bit of tradition and I had a really great dress, came me along with my dad. The song we came down the aisle was a song by the Chicks, which begins, *"They didn't have you where I come from. I never knew the best was yet to come. Life began when I saw your face and I heard your laugh like a serenade. How long do you want to be loved? Is forever enough? Is forever enough?"*

In so many ways, my meeting Andy Garbers and getting to marry him, changed my life and it continues to do so up until this day. He's been a source of life and love and transformation for me. And whether it's a relationship of that sort, which I know some of you have and some of you don't, and some of you grieve within, and some of you grieve without, we're all in relationships. And every single day, we have the opportunity to open ourselves to be changed or to remain in a spot where we try to stay safe and protect ourselves.

The invitation that Paul issues to us as the church through the letter to the Galatians is will we be a people who, in our own skin, in our own bodies, allow ourselves to be transformed and changed? Do you remember when faith came? Do you remember the moments of healing and good news where things changed and you felt loved or seen? Has faith had that sort of an impact where they didn't have that kind of love where you came from, but you found it in Christ?

This is at the heart of the invitation that Paul issues, that the faith is not something that we affirm with our lips. It's not an idea. It's an embodiment that changes all of us and invites us to become different people.

And here no less in chapter three does Paul explore what this means. To pick up a little bit and to go through a brief outline of chapter three itself in verses one through five, as Charles Cousar outlines for us, it's really the sense of what Paul is saying to the Galatians. He's come after these first two chapters, calling them out, telling them what his authority is. And then he asks, who's bewitched you? He's inviting them to remember the work of the spirit when everything did change for them, asking them to reconsider. Have you not experienced the spirit and having experienced it, are you trying to now go back to control and the flesh and all of the things that aren't of life? Then in verses six through 14, he begins to explore the promise of Abraham and the way that that impacts what's happening in the church and God's goodness through Christ.

Now there's particular reasons I think that he's doing this. One of them is that if part of the argument that's going on in the church is people are saying, no, you have to become Jewish to be Christian. And Paul's saying, no, that's not ever been the point of what God is up to in the world. Paul goes back to Abraham before the law was given. So you remember Moses, 10 commandments, tablets, all that kind of stuff, the Torah coming down? So he's saying that's not the point. The point has never been about being Jewish or following the law. The point was always about God's covenant, God's relationship and that happened first through Abraham. And through Abraham, now all of us get to be included because that's the original promise. Though the promise was particular at one point through the people of Abraham, now it's as numerous as the stars and he's telling them and writing to them, and to us, if we read it, about this.

And then he continues in verses 15 through 29, to talk more about what it means to be an heir. Now in the version you heard today, there's a sense of the disciplinarian that was getting us until the point when we were ready. The imagery there is actually

following what at that time would have been known and would have happened in families where basically they kind of had like a tutor who, you're a kid, and until you come of age, they're going to help you actually become a grownup and become a citizen. And that's the sense of we once were children and now we're in a place through faith and through Christ where we're grownups. That will be explored more in chapter four. But it's the sense that in Christ, everything changes, that we are now in Christ and we're grown. We are called to be adults, and we are called to freedom.

Now, as I was working my way through this text, you'll get to see a little snapshot into my brain. This is how I think sometimes. It's my little circles, as I was thinking about all the different themes that are happening in this chapter, in chapter three, if you can't read my writing, you're not alone. It says faith of Christ in the middle of coming of spirit, upright flesh and spirit underneath life in the spirit. Far left, when faith invaded the middle new creation, new world, maybe. I wrote that. And then over here on the right, baptism, clothed in Christ, changes everything yet we keep clinging. Okay. So this is like the tension. Everything has changed. Are we going to let ourselves be changed? So these are some of the threads and themes that I actually want to explore more with you today.

So when faith came. To begin then, the role of the spirit. Early in chapters three, and throughout this text, actually, there's a sense of what the Spirit's about. And as Paul's writing about the spirit, the role of the spirit is very clearly freedom. For where the spirit is, there is freedom, Paul pens. There's a sense in which we, as people have been locked up. At that time and in that world, the stratification between people, male and female, slave and free, Gentile and Jew, it was real. There wasn't movement between classes, between if you are a citizen or not. Your rights were very dependent upon your identity, even more so and by far than we know in our world today. And Paul is pushing and saying, the freedom that the spirit longs for us to have is not just spiritual, but it's actual in our real skin, in our real bodies.

I love this quote from Charles Cousar from his commentary on the book. He writes that the matter of Gentiles reception into the church is not one of strategy or politics, it is theological. One of the echoes that I think the Galatians church is wrestling with, that we wrestle with today, is that sometimes we have conversations about all are welcome, or who's welcome, or how are we welcome? What does that mean? And it can devolve into partisan politics. And one of my great longings and prayers and wrestlings and frustrations and griefs and all of the other things and crying out with words that the spirit hopefully knows, is that for me, these wrestlings aren't political, they are about the gospel.

Paul is writing here to the church and to us as well to say, let's not get caught in the definitions and the delineations of this world, but let's live the freedom of the gospel of Christ, where it's truly each of us in our own skin who come to know Christ and let us be free. This is a deeply theological impulse and heartbeat for Paul and may it be one for us as well. I don't care what your political positions are, I want to know how

your faith animates them. I want us to be a people, whatever our economic policies personally are, whatever our feelings are about immigration. Are we letting the gospel of Jesus Christ be the center thing that challenges and shapes and animates us? And we'll still disagree, because none of us are God. However, Paul writes to them and to us to say, are we letting the spirit help us to see things afresh and anew? For where the spirit is, there is freedom for all of us.

Back to my beautiful drawing. The next aspect of this that I want to explore is kind of at the intersection of flesh and spirit and kind of what happens when faith comes. It's about the role of promise and law. One of the things, again, that Paul is writing about is the way that the promise, God's covenant, God's relationship with God's people has always been at the center of everything. And the law was basically a way of living together because we're human and we don't always know what to do. But the point was never about the law, the point was always supposed to be about that promise between ourselves and God. I said this in my first sermon, and one of the things I do want to note here again, is that at times throughout our history in the Christian Church, the way that we have written or spoken about the Galatians book and about Jewish people has been profoundly problematic. It's been as if they were terrible, awful people. Some early commentators talked about them as the stubborn, proud-hearted ones, as opposed to those of us who in faith now, are free.

Although Paul is writing in that particular moment where he's trying to just wrestle in this particular community, what he's really trying to reach for is not a polemic to say, oh, Jewish people are terrible, but it's a way of pushing the church to be the church, to not get stuck in legalism or defining one another over and against, but to look for the ways in which the promise and relationship with God has always been for us in an invitation.

To the next part. When faith came. I love how in these parts of the passage it says now, before faith came, in verse 23, and then in verse 25, it says, but now faith has come. When faith comes, it's supposed to change everything. Recently on Twitter, I saw someone who had posted that basically said every time that the Bible has something to say about your life, it's allegorical. But every time that it has something to say about everyone else's life, we all know what's literal, right? So sell everything you have and give it to the poor. Clearly allegorical. I have clothes. I didn't sell them. But then other things, things that maybe don't have to do with our identity, oftentimes we can get really judgmental in the history of the church.

One of the challenges I think here in the book that happens in through the legacy of interpretation is that oftentimes throughout the history of the church, these passages talking about male and female, slave and free, people have fought about if they are allegorical or literal. There's many who have written, including going back to Augustan, who have said, well, we know that in heaven and in the heavenly kingdom, male and female are equal, but in actuality, that's not much the case. And I want to be like, but why not? Does the gospel of Jesus Christ not have anything to say about our real embodied lives?

Now, of course, as we pray every single Sunday, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. It's an already, not yet. But just because we're not in the, not yet, yet, doesn't mean we can't keep living and working as if the yet was already here in the now and the not yet. Right? That's part of the challenge that Paul is issuing in Galatians is that when faith comes, it's not something esoteric. This is not a theological treatise. This is a way to be Christian and to be church. He wants people to be changed. He wants us to be changed. When faith comes, does it change everything? Are you so disrupted by the good news of Jesus Christ that you actually live as if it could be different?

The world is only changed by people who believe it could be different. And who are Christians, if not people who believe in another kingdom and another world, and another way of being. When faith comes, it changes everything. I love how J. Louis Martyn says in his anchor Bible commentary, before faith came, we were imprisoned. Until that time, as God intended, faith was invasively revealed. The sense that the Greek language and metaphor here about the coming of Christ isn't just like, Hey, what's up? I'm Jesus. And I'm here. When Jesus comes, Paul argues that a new day and a new world and a new creation is being ushered in. We've been invaded, but by a love that came on a donkey to show us the way of peace, the way to become human, the way to live according to the spirit, because where the spirit is, there is freedom, freedom. You could have yelled that, I would have taken it.

To another piece. What does it mean that Christ has come? Now a major wrestling that maybe none of you care about, but I think is interesting is the wrestling that has happened inside of the theological community regarding how do you translate *pistis tu Christou*? I'm sure all of you, this is scintillating, and you've been worried about this for years. Now, here's what happened. Early in the interpretation of the text into English, it got shaped into German by Martin Luther. And this actually, although the form here is, would be faith. Oh yes, stay here for a second. The faith of Christ, faith in Christ became the normative translation. And this has been this huge theological debate between like 20 people. But it's been this debate about what does it mean to have faith of Christ or faith in Christ? What's the difference there?

The text actually reads *pistis tu Christou* and I think what's beautiful and important about sitting with the idea that this is the story about the faith of Christ is that it's not about us. The book of Galatians isn't about a new way to prove that we have entrance into God's good graces, it's about who God is and that God in Christ embodied the fullness of God's invitation to all of us. And if we just surrender and let that faith change us, it truly does. This is why we see in Galatians, as we continue in verse 26, for it's in Christ, you are all children of God through faith. 27, as many of you were baptized into Christ have called yourselves with Christ. Verse 28, therefore no longer Jew or Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, all of you are one in Christ. 29, and if you belong to Christ, you are Christ, for it is as we are close and held and seen transformed and changed by Christ that everything changes.

To the final element. Baptism in Christ. I remember when I first read and heard Galatians, Galatians 28. For me, it was like a breath of fresh air. The possibility of hope that maybe, just maybe, in the good news of Jesus Christ, that there was a space for me to be me. And that the faith that I had come to as a young girl, didn't want to erase me or harm me, but that actually in Jesus, that we all belonged. The radical nature of what is happening here in the Book of Galatians, in naming this which was the early church's baptismal creed. Okay? When people got baptized, this is what they would say. You get baptize into Christ. That's why you go into the water. You go into Christ. The flesh dies, the old self dies. You become raised again, and anew to live in a different way.

And when you raise up, it's not that it's like, oh, we're all just the same person. When you get raised, it's the ways that the world has said you count or don't count, those get abolished. In Christ now all of us get to be human in a new way because when faith came and when faith comes, it's supposed to change everything. It does change everything if only we will allow it to. Will we allow those baptismal waters to keep troubling us as Charles Cousar writes about this baptism, it is that true fellowship only occurs when all members are truly free. When faith came, it changed everything. When faith comes, it changes everything.

The question continually before us is, will we let it? Because on that day, 12 years ago, when I married Andy Garbers, everything did change. But all of us have been around enough to know that we don't all live change always in our lives, and sometimes those things that we profess and intend with the best of ourselves as we journey along, they become too painful. They don't work out. And what Paul is saying here in Galatians though, is that faith isn't something back there that you professed. It's something every day that calls us to live this change, to be this change, to be the good news of the kingdom that has come.

And the question before us is, will we let it? I don't know many things about faith, but there are a few things of faith in a few hills that I will die on. And one of them is that when faith comes in Christ, it is for the freedom of every single being and of this entire earth. And it is good news. And I would give my life for us to not just know that, but to know it and then to live it. Faith is here. Let us live it, friends. Amen.

Instructions on Running Well

Galatians 5:6-15

For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything. The only thing that counts is faith working through love. You were running well. Who prevented you from obeying the truth? Such persuasion does not come from one who calls you. A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough. I am confident about you in the Lord, that you will not think otherwise. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty. But my friends, why am I still being persecuted if I'm still preaching circumcision? In that case, the offense of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves. My siblings, for you are called to freedom only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence. But through love, become servants to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. If however you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Well, good morning. I'd like to note two things as we begin. One, I did not do that translation myself. That was a group of men who translated it that way and that was classic Paul being a little hyperbolic, so everyone's safe this morning. Will you pray with me? God, on this day we give you thanks for your love. And we pray by your Spirit that you would meet us with that love and change and transform each of us. For it's in your name that we gather. Amen.

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So with a sermon entitled Instructions on Running Well, I thought what better place to begin than with the Tokyo Summer Olympics which witnessed Allyson Felix become the most decorated track athlete in U.S. Olympic history. Yay.

Andy and I are big junkies of the Olympics so we had an enjoyable time watching that. The thing of it was though, it wasn't just her 11 metals that captured so many in following Allyson Felix but it was about her as a whole person that inspired many. Felix was an accidental activist. As she penned in her 2019 op ed piece, My Own Nike Pregnancy, that once Nike, her sponsor, learned of her pregnancy, they offered her a contract for 70% less than she had been making before. She decided to break her NDA, non-disclosure agreement, with Nike to speak out noting, "If I, one of Nike's most widely marketed athletes couldn't secure protections, then who could?"

When reflecting on what gave her the courage to do so she noted, "I didn't know what was going to come of it, but the one thing that really gave me courage was being the mother of a little girl. I didn't want her to have those same battles 20 years down the line that I was facing. I felt like it was time and no matter how scared I was, I needed to share my own story." Sharing our stories and being willing to brave them no matter what, is a matter of our own integrity. We have so often been taught to be silent and to be small. And to dare to speak up and name the truths of our lives for many of us can be terrifying.

I love stories and I love witnessing people become brave in the little bits of telling. Any one of you who've ever shared a part of your story with me, I receive it as a trust and a deep honor. For to take that risk at any point is to risk ourselves. One of my favorite storyteller riskers is an artist by the name of Pink that you may have heard me referenced before. Earlier this summer, Andy and I watched her recent documentary, All I know So Far. The documentary chronicles not just her journey with her most recent global tour that she did twice called Beautiful Trauma, but also follows her in the midst of the complexity of being a woman at the top of her industry while also performing the roles of being a self, a mother, a daughter, an executive, a singer, a leader. In the documentary, you get to see her as a human, figuring out how to parent and lead and re-parenting herself.

When the film was released, she also dropped a single entitled, All I Know So Far. The song in many ways was a letter to her daughter and thereby also to her friends. Some of you may know it. "I haven't always been this way. I wasn't born a renegade. I felt alone, still feel afraid. I stumble through it anyway. I wish someone would have told me that this life is ours to choose. No one's handing you a key or a book with all the rules. The little that I know I'll tell you." And she shares what she knows, the little bit of it, which is all any of us can do. Right? In so many ways, the letters that we have been exploring this summer are resonant with the efforts of Allyson Felix and the music of Pink and the embodied love of generations of parents who have sought to imbue their children and this world with a little part of all they know so far.

Here in the book of Galatians, no less, Paul writes to the churches spread throughout Asia Minor with a fierce passion, lending himself to exaggeration at points, because what is at stake in his estimation is both their freedom and wellbeing along with the possibility of a world being transformed and made free in view of who Christ is. But make no mistake. This is also a letter. A letter from a real person who is deeply passionate and committed to the vision of the world to which he has given his life. These letters are about legacy. They're about mentorship. They're about the mark that these writers want to leave on the world.

And to me, it's not insignificant to dwell on this for a minute. Because for too long in my estimation, often these New Testament letters get treated as if they're tomes of theology. If we can just dissect them, we'll get the rule book of how to perfectly be Christian. And so theologians and biblical scholars have wrestled with these texts to decide what is orthodox, meaning what is the true way of living faith. Wrestling in

the book of Galatians, is it the faith in or the faith of Christ which as I've noted before is one of the biggest fights in the book of Galatians commentary world. Now don't mistake me here. I've given my life to study the Bible and theology and ethics and I've done so for a very specific reason. It's because most of my life people told me what the Bible said. But I also read it.

When I was a young girl and I was encountered by the love of God in Christ, I believed it. And sometimes what people told me it said didn't seem to leave a lot of room for me and so I wanted to read it and know it for myself. To understand what it was calling. Was this a text that demanded the erasure in violence against whole groups of people including myself or was it a text representing and pointing to a God who wanted life and love and freedom for all people of all cultures and all races and all nations and all bodies and literally all? I'll never forget the moment when I was in a church where I was listening to someone preach actually on Galatians. He was talking about the Greek from the text and I realized I was probably the only woman in the room who knew what the Greek said also and I disagreed with his interpretation.

You see throughout the history of the church, at times we've killed each other over orthodoxy. I remember when I started working at Luther Seminary. Do you know that they had a knockout, drag-out fight in which professors of theology didn't talk for 40 years because they disagreed about communion? Anabaptists got killed by Lutherans because they were disagreeing about these things, not that they're not important or don't matter, but as Dorothy [Ezola 00:10:12] the theologian noted, I don't care if you believe in God. I want to know if you live God. So yes, language matters. But as Paul himself writes here, the only thing that matters in the end is faith expressing itself through love and that's what these letters are about.

They're letters of cries and invitations, encouraging communities to live different, to become different, to be transformed, their visions of the world. They're human people saying, please friends, don't forget the good news. They're letters like the one Allyson Felix wrote and lived for her daughter. Letters like the one Pink wrote for her children. Tales of all they knew so far, imaginations and longings for a different world, risks of courage and self discovery. When I came to writing on Galatians, I originally thought perhaps I would write a letter for the human growing in me. And then as I was working on it, I realized I didn't want to do that yet. Because I think especially very often for women, we've been formed to think our legacy is just our children. And maybe for some of you, you've learned that your legacy was in your work. We've been taught that it's in armies or in power, but the truth of the questions of legacy are discovered in who we are, who we're becoming, the ways that we love and that we show up in the world and so this then my friends, are my instructions on running.

The only thing that matters is faith expressing itself through love. That's it, exactly. The only thing that matters is faith expressing itself through love. I get it. We get scared. We want a theology that will save us from ourselves. And there is something safe about believing that we have all the answers or at least we have access to them.

But after a lifetime of trying to control and contort myself and the world around me, I come back again to the deepest truth that I learned when I was four. That there is a God who loves you and me. And this was the truth I knew growing up, the truth that sustained me so that no matter what I knew that that love held me and this too. It matters when we say mean things to each other as I thought when I was a girl, because when we say that we are hurting God.

And sometimes I know people say, "Well, love isn't enough. Love is soft. What do you mean by love? I mean, we'd have to drill down more than that." Paul says here the entire law is summed up in this, love your neighbor as yourself. To love our neighbors as ourselves is not a slippery slope. When I hear that, I want to counter and say, what you're actually telling me is that you're afraid love might be too much, too scary, too all consuming, for to truly love our world is to react as Jesus did when his friend died. He wept. And what can we but do in view of the suffering in our world but weep. And then to give ourselves and our lives so that it might be changed and transformed. To love and to be loved is the thing that we all long for and we all fear. It can be terrifying.

We long to be seen but we fear the exposure so it's easier to grab a sign and proclaim God hates fags rather than admit our terror, that we aren't sure if the gospel of grace is for us. And yet love persists and it calls out to us, to each of us. Yes, you and me too. Love extends and expands. Love opens us and love wins. Not of course in the ways that we so often recognize or even long for. But the love that is embodied as God with us, with the love that's sought to show us God's deep, radical solidarity with us as Paul writes here in Galatians. One that is so for us and for our freedom that it came to each of us in our skin, in our names to tell us and remind us that we are loved and seen and you are welcome here.

Did you hear that? It's the good news. You are loved and seeing you belong. You are welcomed, every part of your story, every finger and toe fashioned by a creator who has made you in the image of the divine. Let that love open you and change you. Let it break you and your heart. Let it render you undone because trust me, there is nothing more amazing or wonderful than the terror of discovering anew what it is to live free and alive in that love. Do you remember what it felt like when you were a kid? Maybe you went hiking in the Tetons. I see some folks who were just there. And you ran up the paths. You weren't afraid of the bears or maybe a little bit, but you kept going anyway. Or you jumped in puddles just because they were there. Too often many of us as we become grownups, we become afraid to run and jump in puddles, afraid to get muddy or maybe to look silly.

But what if we lived free? What if we ran with that abandon and then became people who removed the barriers for others to run as well. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything. The only thing that counts is faith working through love. You were running well. Why did you stop? You were called to freedom. Don't use your freedom though just to stay safe but love one another. For the whole law Paul writes, is summed up in a single command, you shall

love your neighbor as yourself. Because here's the thing about running. It's actually not about running at all. No, it's about surrendering. It's about living in our bodies as if we believed. It's reaching out for that line, thinking we're going to cross it. It's about resting and trusting and giving ourselves over to the power of love. If you want to run well, all you need to do is to let this love in and let it transform you so that we can run free.

At one point in my life, I hoped my legacy would be that people would know my name because then maybe I would be seen. But now I hope it's this. Here lies Sarah. She wasn't perfect but she tried to love well. Might we live and write letters and legacies of love and justice and freedom and life. For the heart of everything in Paul's letter is that invitation. We were meant to run free. These are the only instructions I have. Love well and let yourself be loved too. Last month not surprisingly, I made a playlist on Spotify for the human growing inside of me. Songs that both Andy and I love, songs that represent our desires and the legacy of love that we hope to foster and imbue in this hopeful human being that's 22-weeks in gestation. The first song that I added, because it's my playlist I was making, was Pink's song, All I Know so Far.

In her letter to her daughter, she pens these words. "You throw your head back, you spit in the wind. Let the walls crack 'cause it lets the light in, let 'em drag you through hell, they can't tell you to change who you are. That's all I know so far. And when the storm's out, you run in the rain, put your sword down, dive right into pain, stay unfiltered and loud, you'll be proud of that skin full of scars. That's all I know so far."

And so Paul ends his letters. See what large letters I make when I'm writing with my own hand. May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything, but new creation is everything. From now on, let no one make any trouble for me for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, my siblings. Amen. Amen.

Root to Rise

Psalm 1

Hi again, everybody. So today we are focusing on this notion of not only where are you rooted, but what does it mean to root, to rise? I already read and shared Psalm 1, which some of you may have heard before, and before I read another place where this imagery shows up, I wanted to talk about where the story of both the Jewish faith and the Christian faith begin, which is in the garden, which is appropriate we're dismissing kids to go play in God's garden, right? And hang out. But that's where it starts. And the entire story of creation and of humans begins in the garden. It's a place where people get to walk with God and with one another, without shame, and there's life.

So when we think about where we are rooted, what does it mean to begin in that kind of image? There's so many different ways the story of the Jewish and then Christian faith could have began, but it began there in a garden. Well, technically began in a dark formless void, and then it became a garden. Just to be clear so you don't open up Genesis and say, "You totally lied, Sarah," but that's where it begins. So let's go back to this imagery as the Prophet Isaiah who came to the people of Israel and was calling to them about what it meant to be faithful and to know and follow God. So here's from then Jeremiah, you can read along either in your handout or on the screen.

"Those who trust in YHWH, who hope in YHWH," that's the way Jewish folks, one of the names for God, and that's what it is transliterated from Hebrew into English. So they wouldn't have said God, YHWH means Lord, YHWH. "They know what it is to be rooted, for they will be like a tree planted by water, spreading its roots out toward the stream. They don't fear when the heat comes for their leaves will stay green. So that even in drought, they aren't anxious and they trust they will bear fruit." That's from Jeremiah 17.

When it comes to thinking about faith and spirituality, where you start the story matters, how you tell the story, how we tell the story matters. There are so many different ways in to thinking about and living faith and spirituality and showing up in the world in general. I love this image of the tree for so many different reasons. Right now I'm looking at organic Bob, who is our in-house organic all things tree expert. And I just like come along for the ride generally. But what I love about this image is there's so many different things. For me I'm going to name some of mine and you can think of what yours might be, of what you think about when you think of trees and being rooted.

For me some of what I think about is, A, to have faith and a person who is rooted in it, described as a tree, A, it's an organic metaphor. It's rooted in creation. It's something that is tied to so many other things. There's a whole entire ecosystem. A tree can't exist by itself, right? A tree needs soil, a tree needs air, a tree needs water, a tree needs the rest of the ecosystem in order to sustain, it needs the sun. It's not an image that's isolated or solitary. It's not impenetrable, right? As we've seen with the fires both in our country and around the world, a tree still is vulnerable. And even at times when the fires come and the tree burns, that tree ends up participating in the renewal of new life and the possibility of it in the world.

So where do we begin the story? Where do you begin your story? Where do you begin the story of life, of faith? There are other images you could pick. And sometimes those images can also be helpful. Some of you may have resonated historically or may have known the tale of how under eagle's wings God carries us. Maybe that's been important and helpful for you at various points. Maybe there's an image of God as strong tower or faith as that has been resonant for you. You see how those images can help us, but they shape us. They form us. Where you tell the story matters, where you begin it, and what story you tell yourself, what image you have.

One of my concerns is at times, particularly as Christian people, we have clung to images that are more like the mighty fortress as our God and strong tower as our central and sustaining image. That isn't the central or sustaining image of scripture. Not that God can't be, or that faith can't be that place, but the beginning image and the central image, one of them that we see, is this notion of the garden. And of these trees, trees that are both rooted, but also vulnerable. Trees that are part of God's ecosystem of life.

And part of the wonder that I have, and this is me, and you're going to wonder aloud and inside yourself too, part of my wonder is what happens and what opens up if you imagine yourself as this tree from Jeremiah or from Psalm 1. Like, go ahead. Literally imagine that you're the tree, your feet roots are coming out from the bottom of them. They're deepening in. The winds come, the storms as we saying about, they happen, but as you deepen in and grow, so then also grows yourself and the reach of the branches that become part of life for others, for birds that are migrating, for other animals and insects in life. Sit with that image.

The first year that I came here to the church, I was invited by a mentor and spiritual director to pick a word for the year. I'd never done anything like that before. And the word I picked was rooted. I had no idea where it came from. I had no idea exactly what that would mean, but over that year, as it turned out, it was a year of uprooting also. Because in the soil of my life and my own story, there were a lot of things that

were preventing my roots from growing deeper. Things that made me more vulnerable to the winds as they came. And so I found myself running into rocks, some of them getting upended, but then also sometimes discovering that the roots were stronger than even I knew. And the rocks themselves, either the roots moved around them or through them. And it deepened me. Not that wasn't painful, but it deepened me. And this is the image that Psalm 1 and Jeremiah and the garden talk about.

Part of my hope and prayer is that we would be a people who are like these trees, knowing where we're rooted and where we're centered, able to go back to that spot and re-find it no matter what happens so that we can actually rise, and to be rooted in the world and to be part of God's ecosystem of life. A person who was really important in the lineage of the Christian faith was Martin Luther. There are a lot of beautiful things about what he did, but throughout his life he was pursued. People were trying to kill him and stuff. It was not a good situation.

And as he got to the end of his life, he increasingly not only needed God to be the mighty fortress and strong tower, but that became the operative image for him. So much so that if you look at the end of Martin Luther's life in his writings, some of them are really horrific. He wrote a piece called Against the Jews and it led to the rise of a lot of antisemitic ideas that got perpetuated in Europe for generations and generations. This is why I think those images matter. Being able to be intentional and curious about what our images of faith and of God and how they're forming us to show up in the world. Because at that point, when he was so set, the image was just God is strong tower. He lived that way in relationship to everyone else where everything and everyone else became a threat. And Christian faith became about a defense against the violence that he was afraid of. And I get it. I'm not judging Martin Luther, being human is hard.

And the call here is for us to continue to... Maybe we go back in for a moment to the strong tower. We find the rest when we need to. But then we come back to our center and where our roots are. One of my spouse's, not that I have multiple, that was with an apostrophe possessive, he's over there. Thanks babe. Jokes for days. One of my spouse's things he does is every once in a while he does some Yoga with Adriene. Yoga with Adriene is an online YouTube yoga person, practitioner we should probably say. And one of the things that she talks about, she's not alone in this, is you root to rise.

Because as someone who does yoga knows, it helps you to remain balanced, to know where your center is. And that's part of this image, is this deep human need, where are we rooted? And when we know where we're rooted and we live from that place, it allows us to actually rise. In so many ways I think that is the invitation and

the message of the Christian faith. It's not something to just keep us safe from the world, but it's something to help us to live as people who are rooted. Vulnerable, real, but connected to a larger ecosystem. People who are about bringing about gardens of life and flourishing, wherever we are.

So for you, where are you rooted? What kind of tree are you? What does it mean for you to keep rooting in? What's the soil that sustains your soul? What do you need more of? Maybe some more sunlight, some more oxygen. And how can we continue to live into being those kind of people? Participating with God in the wonder of creation and the beauty of life that is for us, but is also for all of creation and all of living beings. Where are you rooted? Let us root in so that we can rise, that we can become people of life. Invite you now as we continue to just sit with that, imagining thinking about what does it look like to root in? Where are you rooted, as we then do this reflection.

Hope as Waiting For Birth

Romans 8:22-25

Hi! So with this theme and thinking about this passage and this very real human reality of both criminality, of longing, of hope, of hopes deferred, et cetera. I was thinking about all of this, and I was thinking about it obviously in view of my own current state. Here's the thing about my current state, namely that I'm 30 weeks pregnant, just in case. I'm not talking about the whole of my life.

Some of you know that when I was younger, I grew up in a tradition that was very hierarchical, where to be a woman was you submitted and you were quiet and these sorts of things. And when I was pretty young, because of that, I decided looking around the examples of families around me that I didn't think I would ever get married. And I didn't particularly want to be a mom because being a parent as a female seemed like it erased the rest of your identities. And a lot of the ways that I learned how to show up in the world and how to cope was, I was fun Sarah, I was I love Jesus Sarah. I was good at school Sarah. I could lead things. I would pretend to be good at sports so that the girls who were actually good at sports could play the sports. You know, one of those sorts of things.

But in many ways, I think I distanced myself from what felt like a big liability and a vulnerability. And namely it was being identified as a female in the world. It felt like more criminality and vulnerability than I was willing to take on. And it was a way that people would say, you're not allowed here. You know, like the old school *Berenstein Bears* books, we had them in my family in the eighties, right? No girls allowed in the tree house. That's what a lot of my growing up felt like in church. And so in many ways, I again learned how to pass and how to make sure that I would never really be vulnerable or at least seem as invulnerable as possible and up into my adult life. I think this impacted also how I related to the idea actually, of the possibility of parenthood.

I have always been a professional since I graduated college. I love working. I love working hard. I love visions and new enterprises and all of these sorts of things and trying to figure out how to hold the private parts of my life, the personal and all of

those parts with also holding what it meant to be professional. I just hadn't seen models of that growing up.

Now, some of you had mastered this back in like the sixties and that's awesome, but for me, it was a lot longer and more tortured journey. And in this space, I think one of the things that struck me as my spouse and I first started considering if we wanted to be parents was how much stuff came up for me in that journey. How much of terror around my own vulnerabilities? Some of that's also tied to my own family system and my mother relationship being super complicated. But also it was the sense of really the question for me was about vulnerability and about potentially losing power and not knowing if I could hold all of the things and that I didn't want to disappear as Sara.

So I worked through that with counseling and lots of time. And still vulnerability is still hard for me. It's a practice, but I did spend a lot of time in that space. My spouse took longer to get on board with the trying to have humans. And we both got to the same place the same time. And then he was like, "Wait, what? We're going to do what?" And I was like "You said." And then we tried and we actually got pregnant really quickly the first time. And it was really powerful. The week I first knew I was pregnant was during a service that I was able to conduct with some other churches, for survivors of sexual violence. And knowing that I was pregnant in that space and just stating life and trying to build new life and new worlds in the world at the same time was pretty amazing.

And then we miscarried and I will never forget what happened the Saturday after I knew I had miscarried, but I hadn't yet passed the pregnancy. I was in this room and it was for the women's Christmas brunch, and there were probably 150 or 200 of us here. And actually it was about Advent and the longing and the hope and what happens when we hope for things, interestingly, that don't come out the way that we long for, where the night and the things we hope for in the day aren't there yet. And I shared about having just miscarried.

What amazed me in that space was that I watched as women turn to each other, some who had been friends for 40 years and started sharing their own stories, stories of loss, or of longing of dreams that were unfulfilled them or came about a different way. And all because I had started sharing. I shared, hey, here's what I'm holding. And then someone else says me too, or me too, but differently. And that's also been my experience through both infertility and then through this pregnancy I was really sick for three weeks and couldn't keep anything down because I was coughing and all of a sudden there's people who are like, oh yeah, that happened to me all the time. And I'm like, why did no one tell me about this? Like this is really

rough, but I think there are a lot of reasons why, and some of it's connected deeply to vulnerability, right?

There's the things that we can all share about our lives, or we've been tutored to show up and present. As I have my stuff together, I'm competent. I'm okay, I'm doing fine, all these different things. And we all have good reasons why we show up that way. And we also have cultural and societal reasons why it's pretty risky to actually show up vulnerably. You know, I was talking to a person in the church and she was in the eighties, one of the first women in her field. And she said to me, "The only time I wasn't puking while I was pregnant was when I was sleeping, but I had to just hide it because if I didn't, they wouldn't have taken me seriously in my job." So there's good reasons, both from our own stories and from what we know of society, why we hide things and why we don't go into vulnerability.

And in this space though, of experiencing my own criminality in my body, in the last ... actually the entire pregnancy has been really hard for me physically. I've just reflected so much about vulnerability and about what gets shared in public space and what gets shared in private space. Even as I was naming in the breathe in, we haven't spent much time as Christian churches reflecting on the imagery for God, that is this liminal gestational sort of way of being instead. Some of the dominant images we've gone to are ones that keep us strong and keep us rooted in this sort of way. And part of what I love about this passage from the book of Romans is that it names that not only is God in the process of constantly bearing new life in the world, through the Spirit, inviting us into new life, but creation and we ourselves are longing and groaning and moaning for it too.

And at the beginning and end of the day, I would imagine for most of us in our spiritual journeys and lives of faith, that we know the moments of the deepest transformation have actually been the moments when we've found that place of surrender or where we were met. And we felt seen in a place that was actually really vulnerable for us, where something opened up and changed a softness, a new life was birthed in us.

And so thinking of this theme of hope and hope is that waiting or that longing part of the invitation that I wanted to extend to us is to continue to be people who lean in to those places where we ourselves know vulnerability, but also the places to hold space for others in our world that hope can actually be born and new. And this for me has become one of the central truths of my own faith in the last number of years, is that now more than ever, I believe in the Christian story about death and resurrection than I ever did that sense of, as we talk about at Easter, that Jesus was betrayed and that the world didn't really know what to do with him and his radical

ideas about love and life and the world and everything. And so he's killed, but like the things that are designed to kill us, they don't win, but it's through that, right? He goes into the grave for three days, any gestational imagery here? Rises to new life.

And it's through that process of death and rebirth that we ourselves also get to know new life, but you don't get the one without the other. You don't get that. I love that from that looking at all the band folks as if you wrote the lyrics, but that sense of you don't get the joy without the pain. You don't get love without risk. You don't get the possibility of something beautiful without risking the fact that it could actually also all not turn out as you had hoped. And that's the affirmation here in the book of Romans as well, is that we don't hope for that which we already have. We already possess, or we already know, but we move into and towards hope, longing for it, looking for that and reminding each other that it's okay to feel afraid and to be vulnerable and to not know yet the end of the story.

My hope in prayer is that we will be people who live that kind of faith in the world, because if we can live into that, it opens us up to actually as the vulnerability poem I think from David White talks about, to be able to actually love this world, because if I'm too busy defending and being impenetrable, just one of my least favorite words, but appropriate in this moment, if I'm in that space of guarding and protecting, I can't ever be open to you or your story, because I'm not even open to my own.

And so might we be a people who do lean into the possibility of hope and we join with the God who is always birthing new life in the world and in us, and be willing to take the risk of faith, to have the courage to maybe even just a little bit to go into it and then remind each other that we don't go into it alone. For as we share our stories and hold each of our candles, it gives us hope then to remember, we weren't meant to do this alone and I'm here. And so are you, and so are you, and together then there is more life and more hope for everyone.

Might we indeed be a people then who join with God as new worlds, our birthed, both in and through us and in this world and live a faith that embraces hope. Let me pray. God, I know talking about this and criminality and vulnerability that I might not be alone and being the only person for whom this is a struggle. God, I also know that you meet us in those places of struggle. So by your great love, might you meet us and birth new life in us. And that we might discover more, a life that is free, that is full, that is vulnerable, but knows the wonder of being loved and held by the God of all life. It's in your name that we pray and live. Amen.

Elizabeth: Living Into God's Great Story

Sermon by Sara Wilhelm Garbers

Senior Associate Minister

November 28, 2021

Luke 1:39-45,57-58

In those days, Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country where she entered the house of Zachariah and greeted Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the holy spirit and explained with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among woman and blessed is the fruit of your womb." And why has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord. Now, the time came for Elizabeth to give birth and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. Luke 1: 39-45,57-58

It's good to be with you as we begin Advent together. Will you pray with me?

Most gracious and loving God, on this the first Sunday of Advent as we light the candle of *hope*, we bring our hearts and our whole selves, for we are all in need of hope, indeed we are in need of your light. So meet us this morning by your Spirit, so that all that is within us might leap for joy and that we might live transformed by the encounter with you this day. For it's in Christ's name that we gather. Amen.

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Well, as we move into Advent and continue through it, we are in the midst of a sermon series "Living into God's Great Story." The invitation to join this story is for each of us, for it's not just the names that you might remember or recall, the famous ones throughout the story of Scripture who matter, but it's the story about how God meets and works through every single human being throughout history if we will but just open ourselves and say yes.

And so today, as we begin the Advent journey, we start with the story of Elizabeth. We'll get to Mary, who is also in this story, in a couple weeks. But for today, we're going to stay focused there. I wanted to start and move into Elizabeth's story by sharing a little bit of my own story...

I started as a minister at this church in January of 2018. Ove last number of years prior to that, my spouse and I had been discerning whether or not we ever wanted to become parents. We both came into marriage unsure about it and we were content

to be aunt and uncle to our friend's kids. But when I was about 31, I had the same dream twice: I was pregnant and preaching. I told Andy Garbers (who I like to call by his full name, he's my spouse), "Babe, I've had this dream twice. I'm not saying. I'm just saying anything, but I feel like we should at least pay attention." And he was all like, "Okay, you had a dream twice...that means we have to do this, right?!" I responded, "That's not what I'm saying, but let's do some intentional discernment about it."

Now, if you don't know Andy and I very well, this is super normal for us. Never ones to do much of anything without being intentional and talking about it, we met with our marriage and family therapist and talked through things and discussed what would be important to us about parenthood; we discussed with our friends and community; we prayed and talked with each other. And it was the summer of 2018 when I was at Pyro (I was the speaker for our youth camp and got to hang out with all of our emerging generations folks), that Andy Garbers said to me on the phone, "You know, Sara, I think I'm ready to try to see if we might become parents."

So that fall, we decided to try to become parents together and got pregnant right away. It was a joyous and powerful time. It was beautiful. It was all sorts of things that those of you who have experienced either pregnancy or the possibility of adopting: filled with hope and anticipation.

Then, one night on the first Monday of December, after I'd finished a day of work here in the life of the church, rounding out with the Monday Night Women's Bible Study we were doing on Brene Brown's *Gifts of Imperfection* and my finishing writing of my Advent Reflection so it could publish the next morning (I'm always one to do things very early! Ha...I'm no) that I returned home around 10pm.

My Advent Reflection was on Elizabeth and the relationship between her and Mary, entitled "Bearing New Things." In that piece, I talked about the beauty of the relationship and friendship between these two women and how in a world that throughout history has pitted women against each other as if there are scarce resources for money and men and affection, etc., to have one, this young vulnerable woman, a teenager really, come to her cousin and to find safety and refuge and recognition with a woman who is older, who is thought to be barren, would've been socially outcast in her society and now finds herself pregnant...well, it's amazing. Here Elizabeth welcomed Mary with open arms and not only that, but she recognized through the child within her that the Messiah for whom they had been longing was gestating within Mary. Indeed, Elizabeth is the very first person in the Gospel of Luke to proclaim the gospel itself! The life within her and the Spirit recognized the Spirit and the life that was within Mary as Elizabeth gives Mary shelter and safety.

Together through that safe space these women hold for each other, Emmanuel, God with us is born into the world and comes into being. And in my reflection I shared about in my life: about the women and the relationships who have midwived me and allowed me to become the person that I am and am becoming. And it was with joy

and gratitude that I typed out those words.

And that same night when I went home 10/10:30pm, I discovered that I was bleeding and in the midst of miscarrying. The irony of having literally just finished a post called "Bearing New Things," while unknowingly in the midst of my death transpiring in my own body, was and is not lost on me.

Now these years later, I of course have had time and perspective like we all do after things that we grieve, to reflect. To reflect that indeed, even though the life that I hoped for and longed for at that time didn't come into being the way that I hoped it would, that God has no less been in the process of birthing new things in me.

Through that process of grief, I discovered a love for my spouse, Andy Garbers, in a way that I had never felt before. I knew the love of the God that held and sustained me that had always been present throughout my life. I saw the beauty of community and that Saturday morning, during our Women's Brunch as I shared that I was in the midst of miscarrying, wondering with them what does Advent hope look like when it doesn't turn out the way we had hope, I was honored to bear witness to women in this community who had been friends for 40 years, turn to one another and say (often for the first time): "Me too, this has been part of my story."

And to see those tears and the things that we sometimes hold in solitary grief be shared and released and entrusted to one was to watch the work of the Spirit, reminding us all that we aren't alone. That indeed, Emanuel, God-with-us is not just something we say with our lips, or something for which we long, but it's something we've known in our own skin.

And the story of Elizabeth bears witness to this hope, a hope that also knows grief, that knows the realness of being human in the world, but still looks for and longs for and knows and believes that there is a deeper love and a truth in God that sustains and holds each of us.

Let me say a bit more about this story. The Elizabeth and Mary, it's not found in all of the gospels. There are four gospels, as some of you know...and three of them are called the Synoptic Gospels because they follow and they tend to have the same stories, maybe in different orders, thought to be derived from the same sources. FYI- it can be a really fun study sometime if you ever go between and see which text is where in which of the gospels. So Matthew, Mark, and Luke are especially all dealing with the majority of the same story. *But* they're originally addressed to different audiences, translating and telling the good news of Jesus to different communities. Of course, we can read them all and engage with them, but keep that in mind as you read through Matthew, Mark, Luke, and then also John: they are written to different groups with different rhetorical aims in telling the story of Jesus to disparate communities.

In Matthew, it begins, "So and so beget so and so beget so and so beget so and so

beget...” Well, this makes sense because it was more written to the Jewish community, connecting the story of Jesus to the long story of God’s faithfulness to the Jewish people.

There are different themes that appear throughout this Gospel, telling that story and inviting people to open themselves to Emmanuel, God-with-us. Mark then is often thought to be the first gospel that was penned. Then in Mark, it tends to be shorter and more direct in telling the story. If you’re a “get to the point person,” then I’d highly recommend Mark. Luke, interestingly, takes a different approach. In the gospel of Luke, (thank you, Lisa, for reaching our text for today and offering your commentary...I appreciated it very much!), which really is a combined text of Luke-Acts (which you will know for sure if you were a part of Christian’s Monday Morning Bible Study!), the intent is to tell larger story of Jesus and the early church.

In Luke the author picks up theme that is present throughout the whole of Scripture: the way that when God shows up, the unexpected happens. God inverts the expectation of who you think will inherit, of who is central to the story. In the words of the gospel itself, Luke is the telling of the good news that the first shall be last. This is true no less that here at the beginning of Luke, where we’re told about Zachariah and his wife, the prophet Elizabeth. They were both older, which of course basically means that they were probably like seven years younger than I am. And basically what happened is an angel came to Zachariah and said: “Here’s this thing, you’re going to have a kid!” And Zachariah--being probably a rational, thoughtful prophet-- is like, “Nah, I don’t know about this.” And so Zachariah loses his ability to speak. But during that time, low and behold Elizabeth *actually does* conceive. And they’re pregnant!

Their story is not unlike some of you who have known the journey of infertility or of longing for something in your lives that you hoped for that didn’t come to pass, you came to a point of acceptance that probably won’t happen. And then suddenly it does...though in a way that you never anticipated. And you think what?! How is this happening now? In a similar way Elizabeth finds she is with child. And in the midst of this shocking turn of events, Mary comes to her, for she herself has discovered that she also is pregnant. While the news is shocking for Elizabeth and will uplift her in the eyes of her society who viewed her barrenness as judgment from God, Mary’s pregnancy left her in a really vulnerable position because in that world and time, to have been pregnant and engaged meant could have been killed. She could have been left by Joseph, and she went to her cousin for some support and found safety and recognition.

And here in the story, we’re told about what happens when Mary comes to Elizabeth’s home. The child within Elizabeth leaped in her womb and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb. For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, my womb leaped with joy!” She continues, “And blessed it is she who has believed

that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

Oftentimes when we hope, it doesn't always turn out the way we thought it would. Indeed, if there are any Minnesota Gopher fans in the house, you know it's not every year that we beat the Badgers, right? But we did this year. Mm-hmm (affirmative). I mean I don't even like football, but I'm really happy about that!

There are the things we've hoped for. The things for which we long, the stories that we write out in our heads of what life will look like. And who here has not in their life experienced the story turning out differently than you thought it would? We've all been there, right? That's what I love sometimes about these stories in the gospels is we sometimes treat the text like it's the sacred word of God, distant from our real lives. But it points us to the God who is life and also a reminder that God has always met real human people as God continues to meet real human people in the midst of their stories to remind us that even when the story doesn't turn out like we had hoped, the story is never over until we take our last breath. And even then God's story never ceases to continue on...and it is a story of life and of hope and of healing and transformation.

And we, we have an invitation every second of our lives: will we participate and join with God in God's redemptive story in the world, or will we hold back? As Elizabeth's story reminds us: we are invited to bring our whole, vulnerable, human, frail, beautiful, wonderful, complex, all the things selves and say: “YES.” Yes to a God whose hope is never done. Yes to one another. For what might have happened if Elizabeth hadn't given safety and shelter to Mary? What would the story have been following that? But Elizabeth saw Mary, created a safe space for her, and Emmanuel was born into the world.

So it is my hope and prayer that as we move into this Advent season, we will first of all *remember the God of hope*. That no matter where you are at in your own story, that you will know that the story of your life is not done. For if God can birth new things through an older woman and through a young one too, God is certainly not done with any of us or with you! So let us look first for that hope and hold fast to it.

The second invitation I hope we take from Elizabeth, is to consider and live into: *how do we hold an open space for one another and for the love of God to be born not only in us, but then to hold that space with and for others that the new birth might happen in and for them as well?* How can we be people who live like that?

The final thing that I want to highlight that I've named obliquely is how amazing and radical this story is. The story of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke starts with two very unexpected people. And *we are all unexpected too*. We might not be the expected ones to live out God's great story, but we are the ones who in Christ get to live out the good news of life.

Now, of course, some of you may noticed from looking at me that these few years



later, quite surprisingly, Andy Garbers and I actually got pregnant and the human is due on 12/30. I'm incredibly grateful for that this is part of our story. However, I want to be clear that even if this wasn't how the story had gone, **I know that hope is real.** And I know that every day in the last two years (more or less) God has been birthing new things in and through me.

So let's keep believing and hoping together. Let's keep looking for the light and sharing it one with another, and let us keep living into God's great story, for indeed "Blessed is everyone who believes that there is a fulfillment of what God has spoken to us."

For indeed Emanuel, God is with us. So welcome to Advent. Let us await and look for the Christ child together. Amen.

Let's pray. Loving God, we give you thanks that you are the God of hope and of life. As we enter this Advent season, and indeed, as we turn our faces to what you are birthing in our midst as a church and as individuals, God, might we be a people of hope. Might we, the unexpected ones, look expectantly to you and might we then also hold space one for another so that hope might be birthed anew in us and our world. May it begin in all of us by your Spirit, oh Christ. For your name we go forth to be your church and birth the world anew. Amen.

Joseph: Living Into God's Great Story

Matthew 1:18-25

It's good to see you all and to be with you, whether in person, embodied or online. Today, we are both focusing on the candle of peace. We're also talking about the life and the story of Joseph and how it connects with the fact that we're real people who have real stories as well. And, thinking about the story of Joseph and our stories and our gathering today. It got me thinking a little bit about the importance of, we'll often say how representation matters. It matters for kids to be able to read, and little kid books, that present diverse characters so that they can see themselves as heroes of stories and the heroes of their own lives. Not in narcissistic ways, but in ways that hopefully uplift that sense of agency and that sense of meaning and purpose, and being able to read stories about other kids who are all sorts of different kind of bodies and shapes and things like this. And it matters for us as adults too.

Now, when I was growing up and as I've moved into adulthood, most every interpretation I've heard of the stories from the Bible have come from a particular group of men who all went to seminary, who all got their doctorates and were writing about theology from their perspective. Now, not that their perspective was bad, sometimes it was, in my opinion. But there were many things that I could learn as well. But it was, in many ways, a perspective that might not have even actually been theirs. Like sometimes I would be reading, even to this day, I'll be reading a commentary, and that's basically someone saying their opinion about what a text of the Bible says. And I'll be like, I could have just read John Calvin and John Calvin died like hundreds of years ago. I'm actually curious about what you think, Mr. So...probably Dr. So and so, I want to hear from your perspective.

And one of the things that's been really fun for me and going to seminary and having the opportunity to be able to spend that space and time is opening myself up to hear my own voice and to hear God's voice in me. Recognizing that there were perspectives I had on texts that I had had some of them for a long time, but no one taught that from the pulpit. So I thought, I must be kind of crazy, right? Like I have these really weird ideas about things and no preacher seems to ever talk about the

same thing. Well, that makes sense. They've been trained in one way. They had a particular story. Some of you may know the work of Jane Goodall. Jane Goodall, who has deeply influenced our world and our relationship with the animal kingdom and with nature, et cetera.

And when she started in her work, everyone was like, you're doing it wrong. That's not how you're supposed to go about this. But she fought hard to do it from what felt right in her own skin and her way of relating, and it's opened up worlds for us. And that's one of the things that I love about the possibility of congregationalism, anyway. Everything in practice is always more messy, right? But it's the fact that it's an affirmation, that truth doesn't reside in one person. But we're each invited to bring ourselves and our stories and our truths and our bodies and our knowing and to wrestle together and to hear, and to see more broadly than maybe we ever could have before.

Now, many of you have heard me say, or know, that in the last number of months, I've indeed participated in a new deepened experience in my life. Namely, I've been pregnant before, but I've never made it this far in a pregnancy. And that, in and of itself, has changed me. That's now part of my story, but most writers and preachers on Christmas Eve, about 90, probably 95 to 98% of people who'll be preaching on Christmas Eve do not have uteruses. So I've been talking to the human and I'm not preaching, but I've been asking the human to wait till the 26th, at least, to come because I really, really, really just want to be a pregnant body in space at church on Christmas Eve. And just be like Mary had a baby folks, just walk around and point because bodies and representation matters. It matters if we can see ourselves in the story and if we can listen and be like, Hey, maybe my voice matters here too.

So in a way, this is going to seem like a strange shift for me to now say, and now Joseph. I'm going to tell you about this story, Joseph, but I have a connection. The reason for this is because I think I have my own unique perspective on Joseph and Joseph's story and how his story I think is an invitation to me, but hopefully could be an invitation to you too.

First of all, as you noted, Mark, Joseph is often kind of like he's there in Matthew. He's not there in all the stories about Jesus' birth. He's kind of there, he makes it into all of our major scenes. Or if you've ever seen the movie Four Christmases, he is the central character. And if you haven't seen that, I'm sorry for the bad joke that didn't help anyone. But Joseph's actually really silent throughout the life and story of Jesus. From the beginning of Matthew, which is really trying to make a connection to the Jewish people. Through the Davidic line, it's saying, Jesus came from David, and David is connected to Joseph, and Joseph isn't illegitimate by the way, folks,

everything was okay and Mary actually got married and it's not too terrible. So Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us, let's keep going. Good news of Jesus is what's going on there.

But the thing I wanted to talk about that I love about his story and how I read it, is I think his story is a beautiful picture, first of all, in our time, for what it looks like to be a human and to be a man. To be able to just be, not toxic, but just to be able to be yourself. If you are embodied and are a man. And it's also an invitation, I think to all of us, for how to actually show up in spaces in solidarity with each other and to not have to be at the center of the story when we really easily could have been. As we've encountered Joseph in the midst of the story, and even as we hear him, we actually don't hear his voice, we hear the story told about him.

Now he should have been the center of the story in many ways, right? He's the guy, Mary's the one who's pregnant and young and silenced in a woman in this culture. And yes, in Matthew, we are focusing on his part of the story, but we don't actually hear his voice. I don't know a lot about him, so this is all me just reading my own perspective into this. But as he appears on the scene, one of the things that really is a big deal is, in his culture and time, when he found out Mary was pregnant, he could have publicly brought her to trial.

He could have gotten up and said, I demand my rights. You violated the covenant, the paperwork was signed. Everything was in place. I don't know if they signed paperwork, but the agreement was made and he could have publicly had her tried and he could have had her executed. She could have died because of this. So at the very least, what we know first about him, is that he made a choice to not do that, when he could have. And how sometimes even in our world today, we could say that the law, or the cultural norm, is on our side, but it's actually not a particularly just way of showing up. It's a way where someone is going to be really vulnerable and they're going to end up in a system that's going to harm them. And he makes a choice to not do that. So he's going to divorce her quietly, let her family take care of her. We're just going put that one under the rug. He would've been a good, dominant culture Minnesotan, right? Just won't talk about it.

And then, then what happens next is he has a dream. And in the dream, the Angel's like, Hey, by the way what's going on is actually tied to like God and these really big things. So maybe you could just marry her and, everything would be okay then. Now there is a part of me, I'll be honest, when I read this, I'm like, "oh really? It took an angel for you to decide, maybe she already told you like 10 times that God had done...there was something with her and God, and you just couldn't believe it. So you had to wait for the angel". So I want to get a little judgey about him.

And then I think about when I was reading Brene Brown, one of her first books, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, and she was challenged by a man who is at her book signing to say, your work is really focused on women in shame. And what about me? I experience shame too. And I'm so busy trying to stay up on the white horse, that my wife and my kids need me to be on that, I don't even know how to become a human myself.

And for me, I think part of the gospel invitation is for us all to be able to become human and to be released from shame in the patterns that are killing all of us, and to emerge into a new way of being human, which Emmanuel God with us, is nothing if not an invitation to a new way to be human together. And so, let's just say Joseph was in process. Is anyone else in process in any way in their life? I am. I screw stuff up. I harm people. I miss stuff. I think I get it, and I don't. I'm like quite sure I'm very awakened to a new injustice that we should be paying attention to, and then I realize I'm participating in it. So he's in process. And he needs some push to be able to see and to show up in a different way.

And, I still want to say to him and Joseph, may that be a good reminder next time, just believe her. And I'm hopeful that happened. We don't get to read about it. But I think there's a powerful invitation here for what it means for us to think about what it means to dis-center ourselves from the story. But often as we move around in our lives, you experience life from your own perspective, we all do. But part of the invitation of following Jesus and this time of advent is to listen to other stories. To see God show up in unexpected ways and to let ourselves and the whole world be changed.

And I think there's a power in that for how Joseph shows up and for what happens. Mary's the vulnerable one in this situation. Again, she's the one who could have been killed. What does it mean to hear from her perspective? What does it mean that the angel showed up and said, Hey, you're missing it. That was a good first step. Don't get her killed, but listen deeper. How can you show up in a different way by actually hearing her experience, hearing the reality and knowing it and showing up in a way that is radically generous and that opens you to a completely different way of understanding. There's so many different conversations in our world today where it's incredibly hard to hear each other, right?

If I consider something from your perspective, it might rupture me and I'm not exactly sure what to do with that. And I'm supposed to have all the right answers. And if I don't know the right answers or I miss something, then I'm going to be racist and a bad person. And so I got to make sure that I'm protected. And that's not the story of the gospel. The story of Christmas and Emmanuel God with us, is this story

about continuing to open ourselves to a new way of getting to be human together. This last week in our world, well, in the United States, de-center ourselves. This week in the United States, there's been a case before the Supreme court about the abortion laws in Mississippi. This is one of those conversations that is rife with so much inability to hear or see each other. When I was 14 years old and I was in a speech class and I was raised in a community where, no matter what, abortion was always wrong.

And then as a 14 year old, I wrote this speech about how, if Christians were opposed to abortion, then we needed to start doing some things differently. Because I grew up in a single parent family, and I was called a bastard at church because my mom had an affair. I grew up on welfare and I heard what all the adults said about my mom and my family. I got in a debate when I was at Focus on the Family Institute, which might surprise some of you, but I spent a semester at Focus on the Family, it's true. With the head of Focus on the Family, he and I were sitting down at lunch. And it was during the big Bush era of tax cuts. And he was like, well, the church will take care of people who don't have money. I said, I grew up in the church. We wouldn't have had food to eat, if it hadn't been for the support that my mom received through WIC and food stamps and my gram.

So these things, I wrote in my 14 year old speech, I said, then we have to quit judging women. We have to help to build people so that no one rapes each other. We need to not judge people. And we need to make sure that marriages are safe. We need to have more domestic violence shelters. I was a very passionate 14 year old. But that 14 year old knew something. These conversations and the realities of people's lives are actually super complex. And Joseph could have chosen to relate to Mary, just like she was unilaterally flat as a person. Here's the law. Here's what I get to do. I don't have to treat you like a person.

And instead, he first moves towards, okay, I don't totally get what's going on. I'm going to divorce you quietly, at least. So I'm trying to be respectful. And then God shows up is like, okay, everything got changed around here now. And that's one of the challenges and things, if I could say anything, which I'm saying something now, is that in the midst of conversations like this, what does it mean to actually allow for complex stories and to hear people? Because for me, in my own experience of being pregnant, I've realized how much privilege I have. I have health insurance. I have a safe home. I have money. I went to four more appointments before my cousin, who didn't have insurance, got to go to any. That impacts how we live and the choices we make and the options we think that we have.

So how can Joseph, whatever our particular positions about, just about anything, how can we become the types of people who following after Joseph in our own lives and stories, seek to say, Hey, tell me your story. Like Poppy, what do you think about stuff? Sorry, I'm looking at you. To be able to ask each other, how do you see the world from your perspective? Maybe there's part of your story that I just don't understand. I'd love to be able to hear from your spot. And then to actually take our lives and our bodies and put them at risk with and for one another. And particularly for those who are most vulnerable. To say, Hey, help me to understand how this is impacting you. And guess what? I don't have to be the center of the story.

Because life happens here. Joseph, isn't the hero of the gospels. Joseph participates in God's story by using his own, to come alongside of, and make possible, the birth of Jesus. Because if he hadn't, we might not actually have the Christmas story. We might have had the story of a young woman who was publicly shamed, humiliated, and potentially killed. But we, instead, get to light candles and celebrate that Christ came into the world that Emmanuel was embodied.

So indeed, might we bring our whole selves and our stories. And even in Joseph's story, are you hearing me give my interpretation of Joseph's story? Maybe it brought up stuff for you. That's awesome. Cause that's the point. This is a story that invites all of our stories to be a part of it. So let's, this Christmas use our lives and stories to hear one another and to be opened up.

Will you pray with me? God, thanks so much for your great love. And thank you for the ways in which you care about and show up in the midst of all of our stories that you hear and see us. God, indeed, might we have compassion with ourselves and our own stories and by allowing the spaciousness for our own selves to be human and in process and grieving and happy and joyful, all the things that we might hold space to actually hear one another. To be able to hear when we think we're going the right way and someone says, "Hey, this is actually harming me." And might we then, stand with or behind or alongside of, just in support to say, you can call me lean on me that indeed your love, your healing and the beauty of your diversity that you've made in each of us might remain. For it's in Christ's name that we gather and go forth. Amen.

The Rhythm of Prayer

Psalm 25:1-7

Will you pray with me. God, as we move into this time of Lent help us to remember. To remember that in the end, Only love wins. So bring us more deeply into the rhythm of your love and life. Bring our world more deeply into that space. For the places where love is held back and withheld, where love is beaten and bombed. God, remind us, make us people of love. It's in your name that we gather. Amen.

I've loved poetry and music for as long as I can remember. My very first book of poetry that I bought was at a bookstore with my dad. When he came to visit. It was by Shell Silverstein: *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. And some of you may know it. I remember most of one of my favorite poems. I'll butcher it a little bit, but here it goes:

I cannot go to school today, said little Peggy and McKay. I have the measles and the mumps, a gash a rash and purple bumps. My mouth is what my throat is dry. I'm going blind in my right eye. My tonsils there as big as rocks, I've counted. 16 chicken pox. There's one more. That's 17. And don't you think my face looks green. I gasp and cough and sneeze and joke. I think that my left leg is broke. My hip hurts when I move my chin, my belly buttons caving in my hip is wrench my spine street. My temperature is 108. I have a hangout in my heart is what. What's that you say? You say today is Saturday. Goodbye. I'm going out to play.

You knew that too. Yeah. So I miss some parts of it, but I like amazes me that I still can remember from when I'm ate like that poem. Because I think I felt that way a lot about school, even though I love school, actually, it's kind of weird. So I've always loved poetry. And I think part of it is because even as a kid, it could express things that I didn't have words for. I love that about music too. The way that it can invite us and open up spaces for things that normal conversation you just can't quite talk about. There's a verse in the book of Romans that says how the spirit intercedes for us sometimes with groans, that words can't express. Does anyone ever feel that way? You don't quite have words to express how you're feeling? I think in so many ways, prayer is actually that invitation to this space where words can't quite find a

way of expressing themselves, whether it's deep, joy, longing, grief, rage, pain, the things that maybe we don't have words for are the things that feel so overwhelming because we can't fix or change or save them all.

I remember a few years ago talking with my therapist and I said something about how I just wanted to heal the whole world. And my therapist noted that might be a little bit of a large desire. But are we not human if we don't respond, to places of injustice, of violence, should not our hearts particularly as people who name ourselves, Christians, should they not hurt? Should they not be opened up in view of the suffering within our own lives and in our world? And yet to be awakened to these spaces can be overwhelming to the point of inaction of profound depression, of an inability to know how to hold it because indeed we can't actually save or heal or fix the whole world. I think prayer can be one of those spaces, a to keep us awake and feeling, the things that we feel and not just going to sleep. And it's also a space to be able to remember that we ourselves are not tasked with fixing or saving everything, but we're invited to join in the rhythm and the dance of the God. Who's in the business of rightness and justice and love in the world.

And prayer connects us with that God and reminds us that we don't carry it all on our own and reminds us also, we don't walk alone. Prayer reminds and awakens us to each other too.

Prayer like poetry finds a way of naming some things that we don't quite have words for. Today the Psalm that we are taking a look at is Psalm 25. The Psalms themselves although we experience them as written words, they actually were songs. They were songs that the people sang together for those places that they themselves didn't necessarily have words in the usual cadence of life. Psalm 25 is actually, it was follows the Hebrew alphabet with each new line and itself was a prayer. A way of helping people like music or poetry does where it gets in your mind. And you can remember it and you can say it and you can speak it. What about us? What about all the times? You said you had the answers. Like I hear that song in my bones and I can lift my hands and be like, I am broken right now.

And you lied. Psalm 25 is that kind of a rhythm, where David is praying and saying things aren't right. It begins as is noted on the handout that you received to you oh Lord I lift up my soul. The word here for soul isn't just a part. It's about the whole of the self. I lift up my whole self, I come to you with all this stuff because I'm in need. I don't know what to do. It's often called a Psalm of supplication. It's that saying of, I don't know what to do. I don't have words. Oh God in you. I place my trust. Do not. Let me be put to shame or let my enemies exalt over me. Do not let those who wait for you. Be put to shame. Let them be ashamed who are treacherous. Make me to

know your ways. Oh Lord, teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me for you are the God of my salvation. And for you, I wait all day long. Be mindful of your mercy Lord and of your steadfast love for they have been from old. Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions. According to your love, remember me for your goodness sake? Oh Lord.

The Psalms were songs that the people sang together and Psalms and songs like prayer as they awaken us and name the things that we struggle to name. They remind us that we aren't alone and also call us to live responsibly in view of the prayers of others. I remember in high school, we sang a song in my choir. It was written in conversation with the children who had lived in Bosnia, Hertz St. Ni and it's can you hear the prayer of the children? Because prayers aren't just about the things that we offer up in ourselves, but they help us to awaken the prayers that others are praying to.

One of my favorite theologians, who I'm been working on my dissertation on is a person named Dorothee Sölle. Dorothee Sölle lived in Germany through after World War II. And she along with many other Christians wrestled with what does it mean to be Christian in the way that Christianity was complicit in the show? How dare we speak of God? Where is God in the midst of profound injustice? How are we called to show up in those spaces? She notes how our lives are supposed to be living prayers. For indeed God has no other hands, but ours.

And so as Christians, she notes how we're called to be people who pray and who live our lives as responses to prayers and that poetry itself and prayer can open us to becoming the kind of people in the world who aren't asleep, but who join with God in the rhythm of life and justice in the sixties and seventies, folks from across all different Christian denominations would gather together in Germany on Sunday nights for a thing called political even song. And it was a way of being the church and saying, we are going to resist the forces in the world that seek to destroy and kill people that try to keep us asleep. And we want to be people who are awake. You know, we talk about in church, sometimes you do liturgy. Liturgy is like the order of service, but it actually means the work of the people.

It's when the people come together and together in prayer and in listening, we stay awake and we get awake together. We remind ourselves of how God is at work in the world. We remind ourselves that no matter how dark the night that love will win. And then we go back to the everydayness of our lives, seeking to live into that rhythm. And then the week happens and who knows what transpires. And we come back again and we look at each other and say, I know you're caring a lot, but you're not alone. And we go back and we live our lives as prayers.

This is part of the invitation of prayer. Dorothee Sölle talks about how prayer is a way of refusing silence. Prayer itself is a form of truth telling, a way of participating with God in God's resurrection. Prayer itself is a way in which we become the voices and risk God's response in the world, God reminding each other and people that they aren't alone. And we aren't alone. It's a way of reminding ourselves that God is in the business of liberation and love. Here's a piece that Dorothee Sölle wrote. She wrote poems that she said were like prayers to remind us to stay awake. This is called when he came, God needs you.

That's all there is to it. Without you Jesus is left hanging. Goes up in Dachau smoke, is sugar and spice in the Baker's hands, gets revalued in the next stock exchange market crash. God's consumed and blown away, used up without you, help God. That's what faith is. God can't bring about the kingdom. Couldn't then later can't now, not at any rate without you. And that is part of God's irresistible appeal. Prayer in many ways is the way of holding space for the things we can't name and the spirit intercedes for the places of gowns. Prayer names the things that sometimes we just can't even name. And in so doing and so praying again, we remind ourselves that we participate with the God who is about bringing about a kingdom of love and justice and prayer. As it helps us to stay awake, reminds us that we walk in this world together and that there indeed is a kingdom of love.

And we are called to be a people who together and together, joining with God, bring about more of that world. This is why the Lord's prayers, right? Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. So no matter what you bring this day from your personal life and the things you're holding, for maybe the heaviness, you've been feeling about things in our world to injustice in our country and around the world to places of violence and war like Ukraine, bring all of it. Let's not go to sleep, but awaken throw up our hands, raise our fists, do what you need to do and let that be prayer. And in so doing, let us remember that God has not left us alone. God is with us and God is with us also in one another. I'm going to end with another piece from Dorothee Sölle. It's called dream me, God, It is not you who should solve my problems, God, but I yours.

God of the asylum seekers. It's not you who should feed the hungry, but I who should protect your children from the terror of banks and armies. It's not you who should make room for the refugees, but I who should receive you, hardly hidden, God of the desolate. You dreamed me, God, practicing, walking upright and learning to kneel down more beautiful than I am now. Happier than I dare to be freer than the world allows. Don't stop dreaming me. God, I don't want to stop remembering, that I am your tree, planted by the streams of living water. Some of you might recall, that's actually in reference to Psalm one that we might be streams or trees that are like

those planted by streams of living water. And so let us live our lives as prayer, Let us wake up and live awake for the God of all love, truly does hold us all. Amen.

The Rhythm of Prayer

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say:

*Father, hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Give us each day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial."*

And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to them at midnight and say to them, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before them.' And they answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though they will not get up and give them anything because they are their friend, at least because of their persistence they will get up and give them whatever they need.

"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask!"

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Will you pray with me?
Indeed, God, may your name be Holy, and may we live our lives as such and in response for it's in your name that we live and move and breathe. Amen.

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I have always loved poetry. In fact, I remember the first book of poetry I ever got from the bookstore trip that I took with my dad, some of you may know it, Where

the Sidewalk Ends by Shel Silverstein. I will inaccurately give a recounting of my favorite poem, "Sick:"

I cannot go to school today, said little Peggy Ann McKay.
I have the measles and the mumps,
a gash, a rash and purple bumps.
My mouth is wet, my throat is dry.
I'm going blind in my right eye.
My tonsils—they're as big as rocks,
I've counted 16 chicken pox... and there's one more--that's 17!
And don't you think my face looks green?
I gasp and cough and sneeze and choke.
I think that my left leg is broke.
My hip hurts when I move my chin,
my belly button--it's caving in.
I guess... What? What's that you say?
You say today is Saturday?
Goodbye, I'm going out to play.

So I missed about 20 lines, but that was close enough! One of the things I think I've always loved about poetry and music as well, is that it opens up an evocative space; a space that normal parlance and conversation doesn't allow for. I mean, I felt the feelings named in this poem: I didn't want to go to school; I just didn't have as grandiose of an excuse list as this kid did!

Poetry does that, it opens something for us. Music likewise, Maybe it's neither of those for you, but do you know that space where you don't have words but you know it's sacred and holy and something beyond our rational minds is experiencing life?

This makes me think about prayer. In the book of Romans, there's a verse that says, *"The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know how to pray. So the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."* (Romans 8:26) Sometimes I think prayer is that place where we don't have words either to name the longings or the hopes or the joys or the rage or grief or pain. For indeed, how does one have words to talk about families just like ours, having to flee their homes because of war in Ukraine? I don't have words for that. I have prayer and I have groans and I trust that God hears the groans and longings of everyone around the world who longs for life and love and freedom and peace.

Henri Nouwen, Catholic priest and writer, once noted, "I'm beginning to see that much of praying is grieving." It's that space where in rhythm with the God of all love, the one who has created and sustained us, we can bring whatever we hold... again, whether it is joy, longing, grief, pain... trusting that God hears us and meets us in the place, both in our words, but then also beyond them. That God knows the words and actually doesn't even need them.

Thinking of prayer in the midst of Lent is the invitation, even as the Our Father prayer, and then hymn, and also the passage that we've read today all name-- it's an invitation to move into that rhythm of faith -- joining God. I love how at the end of the passage in Luke, it talks about that door, right? It's like the reality of God is always present everywhere. God IS. Right? God is within and around and surrounding, and sometimes we just need to open the door and be like, "Oh, that's, what's going on."

Prayer in so many ways is that opening of the door, that thin space between the world that we see and the world that is. And so we're invited to move into that dance, that rhythm, that space, to remember how we were meant to live, which is in connection with the God of all life and love.

Prayer isn't just something that we do here on Sunday mornings. As followers of Jesus we are invited to live our lives so that our lives move in rhythm with God. That's what prayer is about, it's about connecting us back to that rhythm, to the source of all life, who is God. This is where we read in 1 Thessalonians, *"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."* (1 Thess. 5:16-18)

I remember when I was younger, I tried to figure out what that verse meant and would wrestle, wondering, "Okay, so how do I pray all the time?" Am I supposed to just walk around and be like, "Dear God, dear God, dear God, dear God, dear God, dear God, dear God," Was that it? Because I really wanted to do my faith right.

And as I've gotten older, I've realized that the call to pray without ceasing is about what it means for us to live our lives as prayer, to live our lives fundamentally open and listening to what God is inviting us to, to noticing what's going on in our own spirits. How does God's Spirit resonate and echo within ours, calling us to live, not disconnected, but at the threshold of the door where we jump into the reality of who God is, and the kingdom that God desires to make real here on earth.

Look at the passage that we read today from the Lukan version of this prayer that we pray every Sunday. You can actually find it also in Matthew --and this is one of my favorite nerdy exercises that you can do with the Gospels (any one of us can do-- it's really fun!). So any time you're reading in any of the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, you can Google the passage that you're reading, (or whatever search engine--this is not an endorsement of Google). You can find out where it might be in other gospels. And it's really fun to do that, because you get to see how the different authors in the midst of their message trying to talk about who Christ is and the invitation to interface, how they nuance it a little bit differently in view of their overall project.

So even with this passage, then, you can read from Matthew. Don't just read verses 6-13, see what's happening around 6-13 and the same thing for the Lukan version, because you'll note that they're not exactly the same. You may also have noticed

when the passage was read that it didn't match what we sing and what we pray every Sunday. Now we could do a whole sermon series, and in fact, I know that when Daniel Harrell was the Senior Minister, we did one on the Lord's Prayer. That would be a long day, so I'm not going to go as in depth as we possibly could, but I wanted to highlight some things from this passage that I think speak to us about this rhythm of faith and the rhythm of prayer, getting our relationship in line with and in sync with the God of the universe.

Matthew 6:9-13 (NRSV)^[7]	Luke 11:2-4 (NRSV)^[8]
Our Father in heaven,	Father, [Other ancient authorities read <i>Our father in heaven</i>]
hallowed be your name.	hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.	Your kingdom come.
	[A few ancient authorities read <i>Your Holy Spirit come upon us and cleanse us.</i>]
Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.	[Other ancient authorities add <i>Your will be done, on earth as in heaven</i>]
Give us this day our daily bread. [Or <i>our bread for tomorrow</i>]	Give us each day our daily bread. [Or <i>our bread for tomorrow</i>]
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.	and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.
And do not bring us to the time of trial, [Or <i>us into temptation</i>] but rescue us from the evil one. [Or <i>from evil</i>]	And do not bring us to the time of trial. [Or <i>us into temptation</i> . Other ancient authorities add <i>but rescue us from the evil one (or from evil)</i>]
[Other ancient authorities add, in some form, <i>For the kingdom and the power and the glory are yours forever. Amen.</i>]	

So just to go through the passage from Luke a little bit. When we get to the Lord's prayer, it says, "*Jesus said to them, 'when you pray say heavenly parent, may your name be set apart'*," is another way to say, may your name be holy, hallowed be your name. May your name be set apart, your name isn't of this world, right? How later in the passage it says, "*Hey, if you parents who are evil or human, if you know how to love how much more does God?*" This set apartness is that same sort of echo reminding us that the ways of this earth are not our ways or God's ways.

So with that, as we come into this passage, there's a lot of things that could be said, but a couple things I want you to know is just how it's an affirmation of relationship. When we say, "*Our Father in heaven,*" it's talking about our heavenly parent, that we are fundamentally, in prayer, invited to remember that we were meant for a

relationship with God. We were *meant* to live in that connection, and instead of God being some far off cosmic being, the prayer reminds us that God is real and personal and loves us, and we're invited to move into that dance and rhythm.

Also, if the name is set apart, there's a way in which it's affirming that this world and everything of it isn't necessarily directly in line with who God is. And so the prayer continues, "*May your kingdom come, may your will be done as in heaven, also here on earth.*" Above the text, there is the Greek version of it, and sometimes I love praying with that because it's a way to go back to the language. The Lord's Prayer is familiar to many of us, but when you go back to it, what if you put it in your own language, how would you pray that prayer?

What does it mean to affirm that we are people who want God's ways to be the ways of this earth? We long for that, for there to be love and peace and joy, for there to be freedom, and so we pray for that. Reminding ourselves, encouraging ourselves that God's way, God's kingdom, is. No matter what is happening in the world there is another kingdom, and we pray to remember that, to reconnect ourselves, then, to that desire for God's way, that God's way would be here on earth as well.

The prayer continues, "*Give us today, the bread that is life. Forgive our sins, as we forgive everyone.*" A thing I wanted to highlight is this: we usually say 'daily bread,' the Greek there, there's no other occurrence of that, and most translators and commentators don't really know what to do with it. It is definitely referring in a way to the story of the people of Israel --and all the Christians, so called that they became-- would've known about, where God provided for them what they needed every single day.

It's a reminder to us again, that no matter what happens, God will be with us in what we need for this day. And also it is a challenge to us to not store up and hoard, but to live in that kind of openness to one another so that everyone may have bread to eat. But the Greek word here in a way is also an echo of when in the Hebrew Bible, Moses meets God in the burning bush. The verb there, and the way of saying, God says, "I AM, or I AM who I AM or will be." It's also the underlying root for the name of God, YHWH.

Here, it's the reminder that God is our source and sustenance. That the ground of God is everything that we need, and we need to remember that. There's a reminder to us that we have life rooted in God, and we can therefore live free. "Knowing we are forgiven."

As we continue in the passage, "*We forgive everyone who is also indebted to us, and lead us not into temptation,*" the prayer continues. It's a reminder to us to live from that overflow. Remaining in the rhythm of this God, being people of the kingdom here on earth. Not being led into temptation and forgetting but remembering.

And the final line that's in this passage reads, "*But deliver us from the evil one.*" It's a

call and an invitation to God to hold us in relationship, to keep us living with that door open, believing and trusting, moving in this rhythm. That's in so many ways what this prayer is about. It's reminding us of the rhythm of this God and inviting us to join in that dance of faith. The faith of relationship, a faith that longs for another kingdom and remembers that there is one, and that calls and reminds us to live our lives as answers to that prayer.

Dorothee Sölle was a German Lutheran theologian. She lived through and after World War II and wrestled with what it meant to be Christian in her time. What did it mean to claim the name of God when Christianity had been complicit in the Shoa, the Holocaust? She spoke about prayer, and one of the things she noted was that "God has no other hands but ours." So when we pray, It's not just about, "Oh great; prayed my prayer; I'm good; I'm done." No, because as we are opened, as we see, we then live our lives as response. If we pray for the kingdom, should we not then live as if the kingdom is real?

That's the invitation to us, to open ourselves and our hands to the rhythm of this God and to move in it, right? *"They will know we are Christians by our love"* because we have known love, therefore we live love. Prayer reminds us that love is the only thing that is real, and we know that in Christ and we live that then as people who long for the kingdom and have seen it in part. And yet to pray, to know how to live in this world, it can be painful and challenging and real and hard. And so also as we pray, we come together to do that one with another. Right? If we're continually praying, then our lives are also the reaffirmation to one another. Keep going, keep loving, keep risking, keep wrestling. I'm just going to quote all of our core values, right? We do that because we live our lives as prayer and remind one another, calling each other to live in that rightness and relationship with God.

Dorothee Sölle wrote a lot of poem-prayers because again, she believed that there was something about poetry that opened us up and freed us from the ways in which our minds can get so locked in the daily noises and pressures. Prayer, however, it opens us up again to take some breaths in the midst of our anxiety, in the midst of the scrolling news. We take a breath and rediscover the God of breath and of life. One of Dorothee's prayer poems is entitled "When He Came."

*He needs you
that's all there is to it
without you he's left hanging
goes up in Dachau's smoke
is sugar and spice in the baker's hands
gets revalued in the next stock market crash
he's consumed and blown away
used up
without you*



*Help him
that's what faith is
he can't bring it about
his kingdom
couldn't then couldn't later can't now
not at any rate without you
and that is his irresistible appeal¹*

And so the author of Luke reminds us to be a people who open the door, who move into the space and rhythm with the God of all love, to pray without ceasing, to live our lives as prayer, and to let our hands and our feet and our lips become the response that we sing. *"Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today, oh God, what we need and remind us that we have been forgiven, so let us then generously forgive. And don't let us forget. Keep us from the evil that would keep us from you. For God, you are all things and to all that is and will be of your kingdom, we say yes, which is amen. Amen."*

¹ Dorothee Sölle, *Revolutionary Practice*, 7.

The Rhythm of Fasting

2 Corinthians 4:16-18; Luke 4:1-4

Hi again. So, many of you have heard me share before about some of theologians who wrote after World War II. It's a big part of my dissertation that I will hopefully finish one day soon. That's how I often feel about my dissertation. And so, I think there's a lot of reasons why I've been doing work with them. One of them was that when I was a junior hire, I first learned about the Holocaust and I couldn't figure it out. How could humans be so unhuman or inhumane we say, but so unhuman to one another. How did that happen? I remember being a nerdy junior hire and reading every book I could find on World War II, because I wanted to understand. For me in so many ways, I think that question was just part of the DNA fiber of my own personality. Some of it was I think, a very human question that humans have wrestled with as long as there's been humanity, is how do we do such harmful things to each other and what happens when we can treat each other with such callousness?

Whether, it be comments on an online thread, to genocidal ideation and action in the world, what has happened? What has gotten wrong? What's broken? For me, another reason why this question haunted me and continues to haunt me, is because I was that little girl who heard that God was love. And it very much made sense to me that if God had made everyone in God's image and God loved everyone, then the harm or the hate or the things that we would do to each other, that shouldn't be allowed, because we're loved and God loves you. I'm supposed to love you because I'm loved and not that I was like a perfect kid or something, I just fundamentally, I violated my own ethics sometimes, but I believed in them. That question haunted both theologians and Christians, many of them who were German who were living in the shadow of the Holocaust, trying to figure out and wrestle with what just happened, what went wrong with our church. What went wrong with our faith.

We professed to believe in a God who, first of all, we know through the Jewish people, Jesus, himself was Jewish. And yet our church has participated in genocide against Jewish persons and others. How can we even speak the name of God? What has gone wrong in our Christian formation, in living as Christian people? These were the questions. One of their major critiques that they talked about, was how in so

many ways, Christianity in the early 21st century, 20th century, sorry, in the early 20th century was rooted in a brand of spirituality that was conditioned by two different elements. One of those being an incredibly privatized religion, my faith is about me and me alone. It's about making me feel good or validating the way of life I'm already living. Validating my people, are superior to other people. And it had been privatized in that way.

A second major thread of critique was that so much of Christianity had been about obedience. It had been about forming people to not really think, but the priest or the pastor tells you exactly what the truth is. You better silence anything that you think that's different than that, or will kick you out. And so, in that way these theologians wrote about how we were vulnerable than to leaders and to other external figures who told us the way that we needed to obey and knew because it made us feel safe, that made us feel comfortable. And many of them wrestling with their own face said no, like that has missed the point of Christianity. And clearly if that's the outcome, something went wrong. If the outcome is genocide, something's wrong. And the few things that they focused on one was that the call to Christian faith was always about a dance of inner and outer life. Like faith isn't just something to make us feel superior or like, "Well, I'm glad that I'm not like, Hi Genevieve." I actually would like to be like you, but I like myself too, just that wasn't a dis to myself.

But it wasn't just about how to make us feel sure or secure to stave off those places in ourselves where we feel undone and terrified. Faith wasn't about some way of having social Darwinism to say, oh, here's the most human and the most like God persons and here's the least like God persons. No, Christian faith wasn't to make us God. But to make us remember that we are not God, that we are all equally parts of reflections of the image of God, but we're only that together. And so, they said that Christian faith itself must be something that both transforms us to be more people of love. But it also has to be something that in that dance, we live differently in the world. And to be Christian doesn't mean we get to hide in our churches, but we go out into the streets. We live our lives in such a way that we show up as love, that we show up as God's Shalom, which is peace in every form, peace in the midst of society, peace within ourselves that we are called to be bringers of that kingdom.

And so, we're transformed within ourselves and we live out that transformation. And as we live it changes us more. But it's not just something to make us feel privately better. It's about changing us fundamentally, making us people of love. The second thing again, that they critiqued was the way that Christian religion had often functioned, so as to procure people who would be obedient. Literally emperors were like we should go along with Christianity, because it will help us to control everyone. The more that we get everyone to have one religion, the more that we can say, "Well,

God has put me in place. I'm the emperor. Now, you can just follow my ways." Because, if you can get God stamped on whatever you're doing, it's really hard to fight against. I think about this from my own story, which is nothing so dramatic as some of what I'm referencing.

But I grew up truly believing and being told that God fundamentally thought that women were supposed to be subservient to men. Now, I loved God and I like believed God was real. So, what am I going to do? Go have a street fight with God and be like, "No, I think you're wrong God, like I'm Sarah and I kind of want to be myself." So that, was so much of my struggle and wrestle as I came into my twenties, was how am I supposed to fight with who people have told me who God is? Now, I have a lot of thoughts about why people told me that's what God thinks, because there were cultures and worlds in which historically we had lived in systems in which women weren't equal to men. So, now you just insert a religion and say, "Yep, this subscribes, it believes all these same things I already believe. I'm good."

Even though at the center of Christianity in the creation story is the creation story where men and women are both created by the way that doesn't happen in almost every other creation story. And definitely not the ones in the ancient near east (ANE) at the same time. There's a story about Jesus who continually treats everyone with dignity and honor and respect. There's a story about a gospel and this good news, that's like upsetting all of the ways that society had been structured, so as to privilege some people as counting and some people as not. And that this thread and this kernel is what these theologians turn to, to say Christianity isn't supposed to make us just obedient people. It's supposed to make us people who, as we open our spirits and hearts, we're formed by God. This is why there's so much throughout the Bible and particularly the New Testament that there is no other God, but God.

There is no other king, but God. It's saying to us that we're not supposed to be subservient to the ways and norms of this world, but to conform ourselves to God and not even someone else's notion of what God is. And they tried to encourage and challenge their contemporaries to say, we need to have a faith that opens us, use our brains to use our bodies and our hearts and our souls to ask questions, to wrestle, to think. And in so many ways, a little bit of what you experience with having the worship guide. That's part of why we're doing that. It's because I don't want you to either just sit here and be like, well, Sara said, not that any of you would do that anyway. But like that's what we're trying to disabuse ourselves of, is that this is a space for us to go inside and to listen to our own spirits and to God's spirit and then to challenge and wrestle with one another so that hopefully we can become more human and more Christian and more of God's presence in the world than we were yesterday.

Now that journey, the journey of as the Bible puts it, some of you will have heard this before, where it says, it talks about how when I was young, I used to drink milk and now I'm older and so now, I should like be grown up. I like to say that as the Bible's inviting us to become grownups. The life of faith is to get grown, to take up responsibility for our lives, to risk ourselves, to be willing to be vulnerable, not to just live in protection or clench fists, but to open ourselves. To be grownups in our faith. People who don't merely obey, but people who from our own bodies show up together and say, "Janet Ruth, tell me what you know of this world and God." And then as we hear from one another and from the voices around our world, we get opened up more and more. We become more free. We may be a little bit begin to believe those words you are loved, you are enough, because we've been encountered in our souls by the God who is love.

One of the passages we are looking at for today as it relates to fasting and fasting again, is that space to open ourselves up so that we can get more quiet that we can listen inward, that we can realign and carve out space in the midst of the noise that keeps us from listening inward to our own souls to God within us. One of those passages is from the book of Luke chapter four. It's here on the screens and you can follow along. Jesus, oh, let's go to the next one. "Full of the holy spirit returned from the Jordan and was led by the spirit in the wilderness where for 40 days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days. And when they were over, he was famished. The devil said to him, if you are the son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread. Jesus answered him, it is written, one does not live by bread alone."

So, this passage from Luke and Luke's Gospels is referring to a time when Jesus, right as he was on the beginning of his public ministry, he goes into the wilderness for 40 days and fasts. And does basically I'd say his own inner work. He's doing his work before showing up, to do the work in the world. Now, this passage is also echoing back to a former story that the audience would've known at the time, which is a story of the Jewish people who had been enslaved. And they'd been enslaved for hundreds of years. And then what happens is they get free. But during that time of working to get free, they spend 40 years wandering about the wilderness, to wander an area that would not have taken them anywhere near that amount of time. Now, I never understood why did they have to wander around for 40 years?

Sometimes people will say, "Well, they had to wander around for 40 years because they were disobedient bad people. And so God needed them to get right. And so, then when they go in the promised land, everything would be cool." Steph Spencer, who some of you have met and you've heard me reference before, she leads 40 orchards. And we were doing a study on this passage and she suggested, think

about it, if for hundreds of years, your people had been enslaved. You've been living in that mindset in that world, that's all you've known, that's all you've been formed for. And suddenly you have freedom. Do you know exactly how to live into that freedom when you hadn't had it before you might have an inkling, you've had a desire, you've had a longing, but you don't know it yet. And so, it's going to take some time. And in fact, sometimes a generation has to die away before that newness can fully set in.

Have any of you seen that in your families or in your own life? Where you suddenly found yourself in a new space, but you didn't actually yet have the tools or resources and you kept going back to the old things. So for instance, for me, when I started dating Andy Garbers, I thought he was probably a sociopath. He's not here. I can say whatever I want. But I'm not even lying, I'm not exaggerating. I literally was like, "I think this guy might be a sociopath." And the reason why, he was so nice, he was so nice to me. And I kept looking at him like waiting for the other shoe to drop, because in my life, the life I had known was the shoe always dropped. And in my family that I grew up in, I was much more used to chaos and love looking really toxic.

And so, to have this person, who's like, "I genuinely like you." And I was like, "You must be smoking something." The only reasons Andy and I ended up getting married, because I hadn't broken up with him, which I almost did six times for sure, was because I was in therapy, because of mentors like, some of you know Greg Meland, who I would go to every time I freaked out, because of my friends who I would ask, if they thought Andy was a sociopath and they said, "No, we've seen the men you've liked before Sarah, trust us, this one's better." Friends always know stuff. And because I made a vow that I wouldn't break up with him when I was anxious or on a Friday night. I don't know why Friday night. I said that it's a really bad decision, because he should have the weekend to grieve. But anyway, we got married though because of those things, but it took me time. There are still times to this day, this is true, there still times to this day and there will be my whole life, where I'm not so sure if Andy's going to actually always want to be married to me.

That's part of my story and part of my healing and healing I still need. And that in so many ways, I think is why the people spent 40 years wandering around the wilderness, because they didn't yet know how to live free and it was going to take them some time and it takes us all time too. And so, before Jesus does his public ministry, he spends this time reminding us that this inner life and the inner work is vital for us to be able to show up, to do the work of love, because its hard work. In so many ways I think this is part of the invitation and the promise of Lent, it's a space to remember. It's an intentional time to set aside time to go into the places that feel like

they're going to kill us and discover that life gets to be reborn in ways we never expected. One last story.

Some of you may have heard of Martin Luther King Jr. Martin Luther King Jr, he had been shot and he was actually visited in the hospital by a man named Howard Thurman. Howard Thurman was a minister, a mentor of MLKs. And basically at this time, MLK was beginning to rise in prominence in being a voice for civil rights. And Howard Thurman is said to have come to him and challenged him to say, "You need to go spend some time doing some more inner work, because what's going to be asked of you and required from you in these days ahead is going to be more than you're ready for, more than you can handle." And this is said to be part of the impetus for Martin Luther King of learning more about the way of non-violence, going to India, doing this work, so that way he could show up to be able to sustain the work that he knew he was called to.

And I love that story and image as just that reminder for each of us, that doing our work and the invitation to go into the wilderness as Jesus did is something that's an invitation to life for us, that we can be that people of love. A second passage that we wanted to just put up here for you to take a look at this week, is also Second Corinthians 4:16 through 18.

"So we do not lose heart even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for the eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen, but at what cannot be seen. For what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal." Think this passage in verses in a way naming some of this, the inner life and the work that we have, like our bodies, they age, stuff goes wrong, stuff goes wrong in the world too. But we have an invitation to go inward to go to the garden, to be able to name the things that we carry. And so, this Lent may this be an opportunity and a time for us to do some of that inner work. To be reminded that you are enough, that you are loved. That we might be a people who then live that. Amen.

The Rhythm of Almsgiving

Luke 19: 1-10

Sermon by Sara Willhelm Garbers
Associate Senior Minister
April 10, 2022

This is Jesus and Zacchaeus. He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd, he could not because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down for I must stay at your house today."

So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham, for the son of man came to seek out and to save the lost." The word of the Lord

Good morning. Will you pray with me? God, on this Palm Sunday, we ask that by your spirit, you would meet us, that we would experience ourselves as being seen just as Zacchaeus did. God may we come down from our trees, from our places where we hide from you, and may your love this holy week both encounter and transform us, that we might be people who walk the way and live your resurrection in this world. It's in Christ's name that we gather and pray. Amen.

So I wanted to start off by asking you two questions. The first is who is Jesus to you? Who is Jesus to you? The second question is what does it mean and look like to follow Jesus? What does it mean and look like in your life to follow Jesus. As we enter this holy week, wanted to share both a story that we heard about Zacchaeus and Jesus, and remind us of another story that happens this holy week as well with hopefully some invitation then to all of us, to reconsider a new who is Jesus to us, and how are we going to live in the world? Some of you know the story of Zacchaeus, but I'll rehearse it a little bit anyway.

Zacchaeus was a tax collector. Now, one of things in this time that made Zacchaeus such a concerning character, we'll say, for so many other Jewish people is because he represented someone who in so many ways betrayed his people in order that his life might flourish. Okay. So a tax collector was in that inner mediating space between the Roman overlords of the Roman Empire and the Jewish people

extracting high taxes from them in order to fund this oppressive empire under which they were living. That was the reality in which Jesus was born, was the time when the Roman Empire ruled over the Jewish people. And they longed for freedom in the spiritual sense, but in the political sense. In every way, they were longing for that. So here's this man in the middle of Luke's gospel that represents so much that the people wanted freedom from: freedom from unjust taxation, freedom from this external authority. And then also Zacchaeus I imagine wanted freedom as a just real person in his own heart and his own soul.

And one day Jesus comes. And of course we can imagine that people had heard about who Jesus was and they had their ideas, right, ideas of who Jesus is or was just as if you surveyed all of us, we might be still talking about the same Jesus. And we might say different things about how Jesus has transformed us, who we believe Jesus to be, right. For me as a little girl, knowing that Jesus was love was everything. And if you want to ask me what I still think, I still think Jesus, I think love. It's pretty congruent there. And for you, it might be a nuanced version of that, how Jesus has shown up in your life, how you've been changed and transformed.

And so these people came out to the streets expecting and anticipating all sorts of different things. But by and large, most of the people thought that part of the promise that God had made to them was that they would then be free spiritually, politically, et cetera. And so here's this Jesus, who's a prophet retelling them; this is the story of God and what God's up to. And you better believe that a lot of people came out on that street expecting a political revolution.

They come out and they think, okay, here's the guy. Maybe some came just as spectators. Maybe some were afraid. Maybe some were energized. People were looking for different things. Maybe some thought Jesus was this amazing teacher. And they just wanted to hear what he might say. They all came though with different ideas about who Jesus was. Zacchaeus, we're told, gets up in the tree because there's a huge crowd. Can't see. I don't know if he was short or it was just a lot of people. Either way, he decided that he was going to get up in the tree to be able to see Jesus and Jesus passing him, sees him, he cognizes him and invites him to come down from the tree.

Now, one of the things in having a new human that Andy and I have been working on is we're trying to foster healthy attachment. You heard of this before, attachment styles, healthy attachment. So this whole field inside of psychology, which means that the way that we experience our earliest days of life impact if we believe that we're safe in the world or not, and that the first, most important things for a baby to know, and they learn this just through your response to them, is, are they safe? Are they seen? Will they be soothed? And then if they know that the fourth is they'll be secure. And if our needs were not met when we were young people, we developed strategies to try to get our needs met. And so we'll behave in ways though where we don't think we're safe in the world where we act out or lash out.

And I wondered this about Zacchaeus. I wonder what happened in his life. What brought him to the point where he betrayed his own people in order to get by? Not as a judgment, just as a he's human like us. And so when I go back and reread this passage of Jesus looks up and sees him, I think about the kind of healing that Jesus brings, that it's a total healing. It's a total call to a way of life. Jesus sees him and he calls to him, "Come down." And then Jesus goes to his house. And as we know through that encounter, Zacchaeus' life radically changes. It's not just an inner transformation, but the way he lives out his life amongst his people is radicalized and different. To all the people he cheated, to all the folks that he co-participated in their harm, he made it right.

I think about Zacchaeus and his story and a story again, later in holy week. It's the story of Peter. Do you remember what happens that night in the garden when the Roman soldiers come? He takes out his sword and he's like, I'm ready. Right? And he goes, and he cuts off one of the soldier's ears. And Jesus says, "No, this is not how it goes. This is not the kingdom that I am about." And so on Palm Sunday, as we move into this space seeking to answer the question who is Jesus for us, I want to invite us to consider the model of Zacchaeus.

Instead of bringing about a revolution through violence, instead of changing the world by overthrowing the Roman Empire in a way that was by force, the way of God and the way of Jesus look different. Jesus' journey and through the world saw people and their lives were changed. And in that transformation, then they became people who participated in God's kingdom. This rhythm of alms giving that we live into during Lent is part of that reminder of the way that God comes, of who Jesus is and was and will be. It's an invitation to walk a way of faith, where we're seen and transformed. And then we live out that transformation in the world. Okay.

Not as the prophet says by power or by might, but by my spirit, okay. We're invited to walk the way of Zacchaeus. After the early church was formed, and in those earliest days, the church experienced a lot of persecution because they were seen as a threat to the Roman Empire. During the Roman Empire and underneath it, having Jesus there, the Christians who followed Jesus, they were called atheists actually. Atheists, which is kind of funny, like, hi, I'm an atheist Christian, nice to meet you. But they were called atheists because they repudiated and refused the gods of the Roman Empire. And they said, "No to us, Cesar is not king. The one true king is Yahweh who we know in Jesus. And we seek to walk that way. Right?"

Well, eventually, some of you know this story, Constantine, who was the emperor of Rome; he decided to take on Christianity as the religion of the state. Now some aspects of that were powerful in that it allowed the Christian movement to break open. And whenever there's an opening, I believe God's spirit works and transforms. But at that time it also became a really complicated wedding of the power of state with the Christian movement. And so in the name of Christ, there were crusades, there were things that happened because they forgot that the way of Jesus was not

the way of Peter and the sword, but it was the way of Zacchaeus, the way of getting up in our trees at first because we're afraid, being seen by Jesus, coming down, inviting him into our homes and our lives, and then living differently in the world. And so throughout the history of the Christian church, you see these reform movements that keep reminding people, hey, the way of the spirit, the way of Jesus is the way of Zacchaeus to kind of put words in their mouth because they didn't necessarily say that all the time.

But it's the way of Zacchaeus, the way that invites us to be transformed and live that following the Jesus who on Palm Sunday, indeed does come to save, but comes to save on a donkey. Eventually in the history of human kind, what happens is that there's the enlightenment. We're doing a very quick fly by, by the way, right? And during the enlightenment, it's an upturning and upheaval against the ways that the state and religion had been wedded together, connecting this divine sovereign and faith. And there were people who were saying, "Hey, we can reason alone." And so at this time, what happened is Christianity became much more of a privatized faith through the enlightenment. People became much more like, okay, if I have faith, I can't prove it, but it's something that's going on in me. What happens externally, that's another thing. Okay.

This tension continues as a dance throughout history up until today. And a tradition that's really shaped me has been that of the Christians who lived through World War II, particularly the German ones. And part of their concern was that during their time Christianity became so privatized, so much about just my personal relationship with Jesus, that people didn't then also act on behalf of their neighbor. When their Jewish neighbors were carted off to concentration camps, they did nothing. And the Christians who were wrestling with what did it mean to follow Christ in the world reminded their fellow believers that to follow Christ is to follow Christ with our whole lives. We get down from our trees because we're seen because we know who Jesus is and we've been loved by Jesus. And then we live that love seeking to make the kingdom come here on earth as it is in heaven, just like Zacchaeus did.

Zacchaeus didn't overthrow the Roman Empire, but he did what he could in view of who he was and the resources he had to seek to make the world right. To seek to honor the dignity of his fellow siblings. And we no less are called to that. Who is Jesus to you? Have you been seen by Jesus? Are you up in some trees today? Jesus comes by this Palm Sunday and says, "Come on down. Come on down. I see you," as I say to Josie, "And you're loved and you're safe. And let me come to your house. Let me eat with you. Let me be part of the rhythm of your whole life. And then live in response to that."

Luke is part of the story of Luke Acts. It's the story of the early church, where that encounter with Christ became the way that the people lived. And this Palm Sunday, might we be invited and encouraged to join with them, to come down from our trees and to live a faith that is both private and public, a faith in which with our whole lives.



We affirm that Caesar is not king. Yahweh, God is. And then we live, waving our Palm branches, which are a sign of victory, naming and reminding one another. God does save .God saves even today. So indeed Hosanna, blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Let us get down from our trees; Let us invite Jesus more fully in. And then let us live as people of God's revolution, a revolution where love wins. Amen.

Sermon by Sara Wilhelm Garbers
Senior Associate Minister
April 17, 2022

John 20:1-18

The Rhythm of Life

A reading from John, chapter 20, verses 1 through 18, John's account of that chaotic day. Early on the first day of the week while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved and said to them, they have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him.

Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came following him and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself.

Then the other disciple who reached the tomb first also went in and he saw and believed, for as yet they did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and she saw two angels in white sitting there where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.

They said to her, woman, why are you weeping? She said to them, they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him. When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there but she did not know that it was Jesus.

Jesus said to her, woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for? Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away. Jesus said to her, Mary, and she turned to him and said in Hebrew, Rabboni, which means teacher.

Jesus said to her, do not hold onto me because I have not yet ascended to the father, but go to my brothers and say to them, I am ascending to my father and your

father, to my God and your God. Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, I have seen the Lord. And she told them that he had said these things to her, the word of the Lord.

Well, hi again and Happy Easter. You can say Happy Easter. I mean, you don't have to, but Happy Easter. It's really good to be with you all this morning. I'm Sarah and I am one of the ministers here in the community. And as we are gathered together for Easter, I wanted to ask you, what does hope look like? What does hope look like? What does hope feel like in your body? Where have you seen an image of hope in the world? I also want to offer a little comment that, you know, if the guys had just believed her, like this would've been a lot shorter passage.

Remember, you know, but sometimes you just need to see for yourself, right? But what does hope look like? What does it feel like? I know sometimes as I've experienced Easter morning, we tell a story, a story about Jesus rising, and then it's like Jesus rose and everything's great. Go back to your real life and good luck, right? Maybe no one else has ever felt like they had a real life after Sunday morning that they were trying to work through as well. The thing that I love about Easter morning and about this story was first brought to my attention with language. You know, when you're thinking something, but you don't have language for it? There's a theologian named Shelly Rambo. And she talks about how, when Jesus rose, we forget that Jesus still had scars. And that's an important thing I think for us and for our world, right? Because we live in a world where we all still have scars. We live in a world that's beset by violence and history, but it's not a world without hope.

I know I've seen hope in my own life. I've borne witness to it. I've seen resurrection. Now once upon a time in 2011, 10 years ago, I had the opportunity to go to El Salvador. It was the anniversary of the 30th assassination of Oscar Romero. Oscar Romero was the Archbishop of the Catholic Church in El Salvador when he was assassinated, the year I was born, 1981 for anyone who's wondering. And I was there 30 years later, and I heard we were going to celebrate his assassination. Now I'm not the most brilliant person in the world, but I'm thinking as we're going down there, like who celebrates an assassination? I get that I might not be great at intercultural competency, but I don't really understand why we're going there to celebrate the assassination of this man. Now here's a little bit of a story about Romero in case you don't know. Oscar Romero was a priest. He was a pretty moderate guy. He lived in El Salvador during a time where there were eight families who really controlled all of the resources. He was chosen to become Archbishop because he was moderate. He wasn't a threat.

The established powers both inside the church and outside of it, they thought, okay, we got our guy, you know, he's good at sermons, doesn't say too much that's controversial, decent fellow, right? So what happens is during this time, people who are really poor, the Campesinos, they're working and collaborating together, along with the priests and their parishes who are seeing the suffering they're enduring, and they're saying, we're not going to take this anymore. This isn't just, it isn't right. This isn't what the kingdom of God is about. Now Romero at first initially was like, okay, yeah, yeah, yeah. But could you just be a little bit more quiet about it? Could you just stay home and be a little bit more silent? Then what happens is one of his dear friends and one of the folks, one of the Campesinos, the poor man from his congregation, they were killed.

And through that time, one night Romero told this story about how God showed up and came up kind of like a Paul on the Damascus Road and basically was like, Romero, wake up. What are you doing? Are you willing to just watch as your siblings are killed? Or are you going to speak the good news of my life and my kingdom and my peace and my justice into this situation? And so Romero, who is human just like all of us, started to share, started on his radio addresses and in his sermons to say, quit killing each other. This isn't right. It's not just. Stop.

Now. Romero knew that his life was under threat. And at one point he said, if they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadoran people, which again didn't make a lot of sense to me. And like, I mean, I get the resurrection language, I'm Christian, so I'm supposed to believe in that, right? Like Jesus died, was buried, they thought the story was over, he rose again, hallelujah. Like I believe in that, but like this guy says, if they kill me, I'll rise again in the people. I mean, that only happens once. right? Jesus.

So I go to El Salvador and when I'm there, I get to hear more of the story. I hear about how, when Romero was serving communion once one day at this chapel on this hospital campus, the images behind me here, go to that one, you'll see it. That's where he was. And he was serving communion. Now some of you know, in the Catholic tradition, communion is understood to be the actual body and blood of Christ. Romero is there to serve communion to the people and he holds it up. And at that moment, a car drives. The doors are open. They don't have air conditioning in the building and it's hot. He's shot and killed and literally the body and blood of Christ spreads out before him.

So there I am for 30 years later, wondering why are we talking about resurrection? What are we doing saying he was assassinated and we're going to celebrate and we're going to March together? And then came the day when we all gathered. It was folks from around the world, people from El Salvador themselves coming together, and we marched through the streets of San Salvador, a place with the highest per capita violence in the world at the time. And people kept chanting things like

Romero is present. They kept talking about life and these sorts of things. And I look over and there's this statue of Romero and there's this little like 6-year-old girl. And all of a sudden it hits me. That is resurrection. Like, this is what Jesus is talking about. That the life and the promise that we know in God, that the goodness of life and freedom and love and all these things that we read about that Jesus preached about. They don't get killed in a way that they stay dead, they rise again. And we're marching through the streets and I'm like, oh my goodness, this is resurrection. This is hope.

Because that night, when Jesus was killed, you've got to believe that they were like, okay, the story's over, right? We're told that the disciples went and locked themselves away and that they were terrified. Now I remember when I was in high school and a woman at my church came up to me and she goes, you know that the women stayed around, right? And I was like, what? That's in the Bible? Go read it, go find out for yourselves. It's there. And then Mary was the first one there. She like really was, I didn't even make that up, right? It says it in John and also in Luke and some other places.

But this story of these folks, and you have to believe that they were devastated. They at the time were living under the Roman empire. They wanted salvation in every single way possible. If you think about it in our time, who doesn't long for peace in Ukraine for kids and babies to be able to have freedom in life, for there not to be abuse in relationships. And part of what I love about this story, and I think the good news of the gospel message, it's not that God just comes in and waves a magic wand and says, everything is perfect and fine. But God reminds us that we aren't alone, that God has walked amongst us, that God rose with wounds and hope looks like a multifaceted thing. That there's hope both for our individual lives as we are reminded that none of us are outside of love, that we are invited to come home with our scars and our wounds and our doubts and our questions.

But then also that that hope isn't just a private thing. That that hope is also something that marches through the streets where God is in the business of a revolution that doesn't look like victors coming with bombs and machine guns or something, but coming in peace and with love. It's what happens when the collective of all of us believe another world is possible. That's one of the ways hope looks like to me is to see each of us a little bit more rising up into the fullness of our own skin, to stand and know ourselves as beloved and then together to join marching arm in arm to say, another world is possible. This isn't the only story. There might continue to be wounds, but hope is real and it exists. Too often we act like these things are separate, right? But the message of God in Jesus is one that's for the whole of our lives. and for all of us.

Something for us in our skin that we would know we are loved. And something as Cornell West reminds us that justice is what love looks like in public. These things all go together. How we know ourselves as beloved becomes the way that we then can live out a different world together. And so just like these disciples, I hope you come with your whole self, with your story, with your questions, with your wonder, with your joy, with your doubt, with whatever you come with, and be reminded first of all, that God who walked in flesh is for us, like really for you. And also in that God is for and about another world, another world that is possible.

None of us can save or fix the whole world. I'm not going to have a one-on-one conversation with Vladimir Putin and encourage him to like, be a better human. I don't think that's going to happen, but I can do what I can from my seat and in my skin to say no, that this isn't okay. And together, if we live into that, another world is possible, right? Not that long ago, people who had my sex at birth couldn't vote, didn't have their own checking accounts. Some of you in here know that that's true.

Not that long ago, maybe you were a child who wasn't loved or seen by your parents and into these stories and into this world and into our lives comes the Jesus who we celebrate today. Might you know that hope in your skin. Might we be that hope to one another. Christ isn't in some grave, Christ is risen. May you know resurrection, may you know it in your own bones. May you know it even as you still walk around with scars and then let's build a resurrection world together, one in which hope and love in the end, it wins. Amen.



Sermon by Sara Wilhelm Garbers
Senior Associate Minister
April 24, 2022

The Spirit for All of the People

Acts 2:1-21

So thinking about today and knowing that there was a community reflection, I thought of many of you, in terms of who to ask to share and I realized that there was actually no way that I could slice the demographics perfectly to represent everyone. And so I passed out to you, if you're gathered here in the space, a sheet, and I'll explain that to you in a minute. If you're worshipping with us online, there is a note that says where I'm from and a link where you can pull up the document.

Because what I thought we should actually do is spend a little bit of time thinking about our own stories, about our own identities, and what it means that we are the gathered church. That each of us, in our own skin and with our own stories, are part of what it means and what it looks like when the Spirit breathes. That as much as it's important for us to be able to say that representation matters of language, of culture, of gender, of background, of race, there's so much diversity when you actually consider that every one of us has a different story and identities and et cetera.

That's part of the beauty of the early church. And what it reminds us is that when the Spirit shows up, the spirit isn't an exclusive Spirit. The Spirit doesn't say, "Oh, only this group of people gets to hold the corner on God." The Spirit blows open the doors and every single person both hears and speaks good news. And so this room gathered, the folks gathered who are with us online, and every single person is another manifestation of the beauty of who God is and what God desires for our world.

When I was contemplating and discerning if I was going to come to this church, when there was a job opening here, one night, I had a dream. Some of you've heard this. And it was a dream that the Spirit was under the waters, because for those of you who... Under the building in the water. Because for

those of you who don't know, we actually literally are built on pylons and we're on a wetland. Yay. And because you can't keep the Spirit down in my opinion, and I think Spirit and water have something to do with one another, if you don't believe me, go read the Bible.

Anyway, so the Spirit in the water bubbled up and it whooshed who through the hallways of this building and the doors blew open. I had a sense, "Sarah, that is what I want to do in this community. Will you come be a part of it?" Today is one of those Spirit whoosh days and each of our voices and each of your stories are part of that whoosh.

I'm going to invite you to take a few minutes and I know this might be a little uncomfortable, but if you've ever done Mad Libs, I trust you can do this. Okay? What it is it's a template for a poem called, Where I'm From. Once upon a time, a poet Laureate from Virginia, developed this as a way to go around the state and hear the diversity of voices from the people and to be able to share that. Thinking about the early church and this church, all of our voices matter. This is inspired by, Where I'm From, by George Ella Lyon.

And basically what you do is you take the little blanks here, follow the instruction in the parenthesis. Don't stress. There's no wrong answers. This is your story. And then you just fill this in. Now, here's the deal. If you don't want to fill it in, that is okay to. I'm not the fill in police. Then instead, maybe I'd invite you to consider what are your dreams? Think about your story, et cetera, et cetera.

We're just going to have... Matt, if we could have some music just play and chill in the background and we're going to take some time for us to work on this. I will note you will not be required to share this with people. You will have an invitation if you want to share anything, as part of our Breath Out Time. But again, you do not have to share, so you don't need to censor.

If you're sitting in the back and you want to go up to one of the high top tables during this time, you can do that. So, take some time. Let's fill this out and think about where you're from and how does where you're from, represent part of how God's Spirit is at work in the world. Let's take some time.

If you're not finished, you can either keep writing right now or you can pause whatever you'd like to do. I'm just going to read you a couple lines. I am from bottles for baby. From pillows and rugs. I am from the white house with blue shutters of peace. I am from lilacs. The spruce whose long limbs I remember as if they were my own.

I don't know yet what you wrote in yours. I'd welcome, if anyone wants to share. I love reading those. Yeah. You want to read some of yours? Yeah, yeah. Come up here. That'd be great.

So I'm from love and hard work and you are my sunshine. I'm from 964
shared conversation over good food. I'm from Minnesota and Germany,
Ireland, Africa, and likely more too. From grits and sauerkraut, from
Vivian and Ella, two tenacious, stylish grandmothers who are boldly
Christian, who leave behind artifacts of love on my nightstand and
memories of unconditional love in my heart.

Hmm. Thank you so much. Thank you. Thank you. So thanks for sharing that
and just want to say, yeah, what does it mean that you think about this
passage in Acts. When you think about all these folks who were gathered and
that in their own skin, as they had gathered, that the Spirit came in and that
tongues rested on each of them and people from Edina and St. Louis Park
today, and Hopkins and Tallahassee, wherever you're from, each heard the
good news in their own language and they spoke it too.

What do you dream? What are your visions and hopes? What does it look like
to hear and speak the good news in your own skin? I want to invite you now,
to actually turn to some folks, if there's just a couple of you, if you want to
grab other people, you can share a little bit about how this was. If you want to
share some of your piece, one with another, invite you to do that as well and
we'll just take some time to do that. How was this for you? Or what does it
look like to hear good news in your own skin? Let's take a few minutes to do
that for our Breath Out.

Just really appreciate that and again, just want to invite us as we sing this last
song together, to be reminded that when the Spirit shows up and when the
Spirit breathes and blows and bears the church, that it looks like each of us,
rising more fully into our skin and joining together *with God's Spirit to make a
world in which the love of Christ is for everyone.*

Sara Wilhelm Garbers
Senior Associate Minister
May 01, 2022

Who to Listen to

Acts 5:27-32

When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as leader and savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him." The word of the Lord.

Good morning.

As we continue in worship, will you pray with me? Christ who has risen, may our lives live in view of that reality. May our lives be in hallelujah. Holy Spirit, meets us here this morning, and teaches us all and opens our hearts that we might be our church. It's in Christ name we gather. Amen. Well again, hello. It's so good to be with you this morning. I'm Sarah, one of the ministers here at Meetinghouse Church. And we just started a new series last week, talking about church. Seems like an appropriate thing for a church to do, right? To talk about what it means to be church and what it means to be church on mission.

To ask these questions and delve into it, we thought what a better place to start than with the early church, right? Seems like a good place for a church to turn towards. And so we hear so much of the story of the early church in the book of Acts. And so that's what we'll be going through in this series is the book of Acts asking the questions of what does it mean for us to be church in our time? Who is God calling us to be, and how do we live faithfully in view of that? The story of acts is wedded together with the story of Luke. It was written as one book where the story of Jesus becomes a foundation on which the church is built, right? We'd hope there's a hymn about that, the church is one foundation.

See, I know lots of kinds of music. In fact, the other day I was talking with Jeff thinking about the title of this sermon.

And I said, "You know, this makes me think of a song." And Jeff was very surprised about this and said, "Oh really, what song?"

This is extreme sarcasm by the way, because I always have a song for everything. So for those of you who don't remember, it was the early '90s, the heyday of the synthesizer, when Amy Grant released her *Unguarded* album. Anybody? Anybody? Okay. Some of you might be calling to mind the song, (singing) The synthesizer. (singing) Not quite as good as the original, but you know, forgive me. I'm not Amy Grant. But this question was one of the questions for the early church about who were they going to listen to?

What did it mean to be the church? What did it mean to take up the name of Jesus? What did it mean to live that in the world? And that's the question and the struggle with them that we're turning to, and we got to hear Kim read for us from Acts chapter five, a little bit of context. We're five chapters into the recorded story of the early church. What's happened at the end of Luke, Jesus has gone up into heaven, given the gift of the Holy Spirit. We had Pentecost. All the people got to hear the good news in their own language, in their own skin, in their own identities, and they began to wrestle then together with what did it mean to be the church? The passage that we've come to is not the first, but the second time that it's recorded that these early followers of Jesus just couldn't seem to get their acts together in listening to the public authorities.

They had been warned. They were warned and thrown into jail then. And here again now they're brought before the teachers of the law and they're told, "Hey, listen, we've already told you, you're supposed to quit talking about this guy. What are you doing?" And they're like, "Well, sorry, not sorry. But we have to obey God. We have to be faithful to the witness that we've seen in view of who Christ is. And this is the moment in which we join them in the story with the question of who do we listen to? What does it mean to be church in our time? And who do we, without synthesizers, who do we listen to?"

As we consider that, I wanted to pose five questions. I know that's more than I think you're supposed to do in a sermon. I think I get a three-question limit usually, but just give me some grace. Jesus rose from the dead, so grace is for everybody including preachers who come up with five questions, okay? So the first question that I wanted to bring up this morning is the question about, as we read passages like this one from Acts, do we read it as just a story from long ago? Do we mythologize this story? Or do we let it speak to us now? So the question is, do we mythologize the story?

There are so many different texts in scripture, so many stories, but do we approach them as just stories that were from a historical past, or do we believe that these stories are stories that shape us today as a community? Are we mythologizing these stories, or are we letting these stories speak to us now?

The book of Acts has all sorts of stories, as does the Bible, of things that are complicated. And we wrestle together and people have wrestled throughout history with what do they mean? But do we take them seriously, or do we mythologize them?

You may remember in Acts, some of you've heard this. It talks about how all the believers, they sold everything and they shared everything in common. How many of you live like that? Notice I'm not raising my hand. Okay? Now, does that mean we just say, "Oh, that was a story from a long time ago." Or do we pick it up and say, what is this story inviting us to consider about what it means to be church? What might we learn from it? So question one, do we mythologize this story, or do we let it be a story that shapes us?

You might guess where I sit with that question, because I hope indeed which is my second question, is how do we translate the story to our time? What does the story ask of us? What if we read this story from the book of Acts and look around our world for examples and places where people are seeking to live in this kind of faithful witness in our time, how are we ourselves striving to live in faithful witness in our time? Where are the places in our own world where we might be being invited even today to say clearly, "I know you don't want me to do this."

But I have to obey God. I have to listen to and take seriously the name and the call of Christ in my life. To figure out this translation work is complicated and hard and it asks a lot of us, but isn't that what we're told in following Jesus? Come and learn for me. Yes, it is a yoke, but it's one that's light. It's one that's meant to make us free. How do we translate this story into our time? Thinking about this story and reading it, do any stories from the more recent history pop to your mind?

For me, one that came to mind was thinking about Martin Luther King Jr., right? Not so far into the past is this story of the early church. He, along with other ministers and black clergy leaders and other leaders of who were white and of other religions as well, they joined together and for the Christian ministers and leaders, they did so because they believed in the biblical call that freedom was for everybody. They took the example of Exodus.

And then again of the early church saying, "We ourselves, we believe that these laws aren't right and just, and who are we going to obey? We're going to obey God."

If you read any of Martin Luther King's speeches, you hear again and again, throughout them a belief that, "I ain't fearing any man, because my eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." It's a quote from his final message that he gave. And yet of course there were people who were opposed to this movement, people within the church, just like the early church was experiencing. Where at that time it was other religious leaders who said, "No, we don't want to deal with this Jesus, and what you're saying, it's asking from us. No, stop talking about it." Likewise MLK and other civil rights leaders said, "We can't quit talking about this, because the gospel is good news for everybody and so we are going to keep talking. And you can throw me in jail, but I'm going to keep talking." And they took his encouragement, this passage from Acts. And we ourselves can likewise take encouragement in our time, but are we mythologizing the story? Will we let the story speak into our lives and our time? A third question, does our faith embody a both/and? I'll say more about that.

Sometimes when we talk about faith, it's as if it's a privatized thing only. I've accepted Jesus into my heart and I strive to live in relationship with Jesus. That truth has changed my life again and again. But the story of the early church challenges us that if the encounter with Jesus is only about my private life, then I have forgotten and neglected part of the call of the gospel, which is the call to a community, to be the church. And then for the church to be the witness to another kingdom in the world. Our faith then calls us to both be transformed within our inner being and to live that transformation.

I'm committed to my relationship with Andy. But if I only hold that within myself and don't live on a daily basis so as to demonstrate and embody that love, then what does it mean? At that point I'm guilty of what 1st Corinthians 13 talks about. I'm a clanging gong and symbol without any meaning, because love is that which is practiced out loud and in public. It imbues everything of who we are. The call of Christ isn't to a part of our lives; it's to the whole of our lives, that we could be Christian in every part of who we are and how we move. So do we take this example and live a faith that is both/and, a faith of inner transformation, and a faith that is about transforming the world in partnership with God's Spirit.

The first question again, do we mythologize this story, or do we let it speak to us? The second question.

Do we let this story speak and ask us to wrestle with how we are Christian in our time? The third question, will our faith be a both/and, a public and private about inner transformation and political and every reform in our entire world. The fourth then, and this one is especially complicated. When we say we must obey God, are we following God, obeying God, listening to God's voice, or are we following and listening to human rules? Are we following God or actually obeying human rules? Let me say more about this. Here's the deal, we all live in culture and time and history. Since the earliest church, they struggled with this. The book of Galatians, if you recall the summer sermon series, not that I think that you do. So I'll refresh you. We talked about how in the earliest church; part of the conflict that was at play was that it was one where they were wrestling. Did you have to be ethnically Jewish to follow Jesus or was the gospel for Gentiles too?

Now when we speak about Jews and Gentiles, make no mistake that that is difference of the ethnicity, religious background, and cultural practices. And the answer that God gives again and again throughout the New Testament is that this is a good news for everyone in their skin, whatever their background, whatever their gender, whatever their culture, et cetera.

And of course we still make sense of God in our cultural times and places. We can't not do that. God is a God who operates inside history and inside of cultures. But God is not bound by culture. God is not the owned by just one culture. God is not privy to just one time in history back then when everyone was godly, God operates in our history, but God is also beyond history and beyond culture. And so as we as people strive to become Christian, the cross should be in critical relationship with how we live. Do we open ourselves up to keep praying, "God, I don't know what it means to follow you in this way. Is what I think about this just about my cultural norms, or is it what your spirit is inviting and asking us to become and to be, let me give some flesh to this, because this is maybe a little ethereal.

When Western missionaries first encountered cultures in Africa, one of the aspects that were required for most missionaries as they converted people was that they expected that people who were in polygamous relationships must only have one wife. This is for the men, of course. Must only have one wife if they were to become Christian. Okay? Now I, as a Christian female living in this time and place, I think I have some decent arguments against polygamy. Okay? I think I have some good ones that I think are pretty biblically grounded. And I cannot erase the fact that the majority of relationships of which my Bible talks about were ones in which the patriarchs of our faith had multiple spouses. That makes me really uncomfortable.

I don't like it, I don't always know what to do with it, but for me as a missionary to go into another culture and then say, "I know for sure, this is the only way you can become Christian." How much of that is influenced by my own cultural norms, and how much of it is influenced by the Bible?

It's at least something for us to get a little uncomfortable with. That doesn't mean I'm telling you all that polygamy is the way to go here today. So don't take that as a takeaway from the sermon. What I'm trying to get at though is how is the cross in critical relationship with what it means, what we think it looks like for us to be Christian. In our world, in which we name things as culture wars, they usually actually are that. They're culture wars. But it doesn't mean that one side of the culture war has all of the biblical truth and another part doesn't. They probably both have things wrong and both have things right, and maybe both/and. I don't know because I'm not actually God, just in case you're wondering.

How do we then take the example of the early church to wrestle, to discern with the Spirit? Am I obey and listening to God, or is this my cultural norm in preference? Is the Bible really opposed to equality in marriages, or have we historically thought that men were to be the head of the household because that's what our culture thought?

We could have a conversation about that, but let's as Christians go to scripture, wrestle with it together, invite the Spirit and say, "What does it mean to be Christian in our time? Am I listening to God, or am I more formed by my cultural norms?" And then within that, the fifth question. If I've discerned that I'm listening to God and there are some things in culture that don't agree with that, what am I willing to risk? Sometimes I think we gloss over how much the early church risked. It wasn't smooth sailing. Being a Christian wasn't just peace, it was peace and struggle in the world. They strove to live faithful witnesses in a world in which this was not welcome.

And I think about some of my greatest grief in our time. I'm not saying that I follow Jesus correctly, but I know that I'm trying. I try to take seriously in every day of my life what is the call of Christ? And the thing that's heartbreaking is that in our world right now, everything is so shaped by political partisanship and by the media that it becomes nearly impossible for us to even hear one another, or to have a conversation about some hard things, because we get labeled, we label each other. And I wonder what would happen if we leaned in a little bit more, and were willing to risk following God in a world that told us we all were supposed to be each other's enemies.

I spoke last week with a person I'm close with who is on staff with Cru, formerly Campus Crusade for Christ. After 35 years, one of their ministry partners ceased supporting them. And the reason for this was because last summer at Cru's staff gathering, they talked about racism. The person said, "I refuse to support a ministry organization that supports critical race theory." And after 35 years, the people that I know lost their most faithful and longest supporters. They hadn't changed their belief that the mission of Cru was to win, build; send, to have people encounter relationship with Jesus. No, what had changed was we live in a world that to even name that there might be some historic and present injustice around race meant that you embraced a thing that was antithetical to Christianity. And yet as Christians, do we not believe everyone is made in the image of God?

Does the scripture not talk about jubilee, about making things right, about caring for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the oppressed? That is not a political agenda. It's a vision of the God who is the God of all of us and wants us to be free in Christ. Now we're going to disagree about how to live that out. But let's wrestle together with the Spirit as the early church did. And of course they didn't do that perfectly either. Do we mythologize these stories, or will we let them translate into our time? Will we live our faith as a both/and of private and public lived out life? Will we continue to let the cross and the spirit and this community and other believers shape and challenge and invite us to see things anew? And will we be willing to risk to refuse the ways in which our current times seek to keep us separated, and in so doing, seek to become Christian?

We are a people who are called to follow Jesus. And the thing about this Jesus, is as the early church bore witness to, and as the end of this passage in Acts talks about, one of the leaders of the Sanhedrin stood up and said, "Listen, we've seen this kind of thing before. We've seen these folks in their little uprising thinking something's going on. Let's just let it play out, and if there's no harm, no foul, it'll die out." And it didn't die out. The church of God and the good news of God and Christ will never die out. It will never cease.

And the clarion call of the gospel of Jesus Christ that this early church heard and believed is the clarion call that I know many of you have heard in your own life. And if not, might you hear it today. The God of the universe loves you and is for you and says, "Take up your cross and follow me." Might we be a people as the church on mission who listen to the God of the universe striving and struggling, but with so much grace to be Christian in our time, to bear witness to this good news and to this kingdom? May that be so, and by Christ go with and before and behind us, as we seek to live it. Amen.

Sermon by Sara Wilhelm Garbers
Senior Associate Minister
May 8, 2022

Waking Up

Acts 9:1-20 (NRSV)

Saul, who was a religious leader, was violently opposed to the people who were following Jesus and thought they should be imprisoned and or killed. So he asked for letters from the high priest that he could bring to the synagogues and Damascus, which would sanction his mission, which was that he found any people who were part of the way, that what the early church was called irrespective of their gender. He might have them arrested and cared off to Jerusalem.

As Paul was approaching Damascus, a light from heaven came out of nowhere and flashed around him. He fell to the ground and he heard a voice saying to him, Saul, Saul, why do you come against me? Saul asked, who are you? Lord. The reply came. I am Jesus, persecuting, get up and enter the city. And you will be told what to do.

The men who were traveling with Saul were speechless because they heard the voice, but saw no one. Saul got up, but he couldn't see anything. So his friends had to lead him into Damascus. For three full days he couldn't see and didn't eat or drink anything.

At the same time, there was a follower of Jesus in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord called him in a vision, "Ananias," and Ananias answered, "Here I am Lord". The Lord said to him, get up and go to the street called Straight. And at the house of Judas, look for a man from Tarsus called, named Saul. Right now he is praying and he has had a vision in which a man named Ananias came in to lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.

But Ananias protested, "Lord, I've heard a lot about this guy and how horrible he has been to Christians in Jerusalem. And now he has come here to arrest all of us". But the Lord said to Annas, "I hear you, but go anyway, because I want to use him to be a part of bringing my good news to everyone. I will let him know, though, that following my call will be a harrowing journey for him."

So Ananias went and found Saul and put his hands on him saying, "Brother, 973 the Lord, Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here has sent me so that you might go see again. And that you might be filled with the holy spirit and immediately something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again, then Saul got up and got baptized. And after he had eaten, he regained his strength again. For several days, Saul was with the disciples in Damascus and he immediately began to tell everyone in the synagogues about Jesus boldly claiming he is the son of God, Acts 9:1-20. This is the word of the Lord.

Good morning! Either in the chat or with a neighbor to turn and just share something that you noticed or something that maybe hit you in a different way if you had heard this before, and if you hadn't heard it, just anything that jumped out to you. Okay. So we're just going to do that just quick, fast observations about what you just heard, Elaine and Lisa read for us. And thanks for reading. Take another 30 seconds. You don't get to say everything.

So right now we are in the middle of, or the beginning middle of a sermon series called "The Church on Mission." As we're exploring that, we've gone to the book of Acts and Acts in the Bible is the stories it's acts of the apostles. It's basically the story of the early church...which we figured was a good place to start with if we were talking about what does it mean to be the church and to be the church on mission. And so today we come to this passage, which is from Acts chapter nine. Was anyone surprised by what they heard? Any hands? Anyone like, "Oh, that's kind of interesting!" No, you all thought this is just the silliest passage and totally irrelevant for anything ever. Okay, cool. Oh, Andy Garbers. Thank you. I see your hand! I will keep you. We are married to each other.

I mean, when you actually really sit with, or hear, or read this passage, and one of the things I like messing with the language sometimes because sometimes I've had the experience where you read the Bible and it's like, "and so, and so begat so and so begat so and so, and then some things happened and Jesus". I'm like, okay. But this story, I mean what's happening here is pretty intense, right? It's the early days of the church and Saul is one amongst many people who are really unhappy, we might say in an indirect communication sort of way. Very unhappy with this new movement that's afoot, and Saul has taken on personal responsibility to do all he can to destroy it.

And so he violently goes after people who are identifying as followers of the way, and he gets these letters, which sanction his behavior and he's going to round up everyone, cart them off, and imprison them. Doesn't matter what their gender is, doesn't matter anything, he's going to go after everyone and going to throw them in jail. And I wanted us to rehear this passage because I think sometimes when we encounter stories from the Bible, they can live in

abstraction, right. We read it in again, begat so and so, begat so and so, Jesus. We're like, but what does it actually mean? And does it have anything to speak to our actual embodied lives today? And what would it have been like to be amongst this number of people who know that there are folks who are literally going to imprison you because you've decided to follow this new way, what kind of horrifying space would that be? And what would that look like? And what does it mean then for us to take these stories out of abstraction land, to demythologize them and to actually let them take on some flesh and realness in our own lives.

So today I'm going to weave some threads. That's the first one. The second one is the day itself today, as I've said already is Mother's Day. It's a day that like many holidays, they allow for a special moment for us to pause, to celebrate, to honor, to take aside special, sacred time, to be able to acknowledge things. Also, this is a day where a lot of things get bought, right? It's become very consumeristic in the way that we engage with this holiday in many ways. But it's also a day in some ways that I want to argue that inside of the church, sometimes we fetishize this day and inside of the world as well. What do I mean by fetishize? I mean, we make a day, this one special day, like the one day a year where we're going to treat women like they're the most important people in the entire planet right. For one day.

And today is a bigger day than Father's Day, right? I mean, if you're a father, you know that. You get the leftovers and everything, but, but that's because we get one day folks. It's one day. the really important day where, if you read the litanies, not litanies as in prayer, but litanies, as in Google searches...if you read the litanies, you'll discover through your Google search are things like clearly people who are in heterosexual relationships and are females are the only ones who load the dishwashers, are the only ones who cook. Right?! Are the only ones who do anything. According to these lists, (have you ever seen one)? Like what to do for your wife on Mother's Day? Like load the dishwasher the right way.

What world do we live in? I don't know. Right?! But when we fetishize something, we make it this like special set apart thing. It allows us, I think, to not have to deal with it in our real lives, right? If I can lift it up and put it over here, I don't have to let it actually have flesh because what does it mean for us to be good to each other every single day of the year? What does it mean for us to be people who create worlds in which on every single day equality and honoring of each other and our relationships is the norm of how we live. So hear me, I'm excited to be celebrated today and honored. And I wonder what it looks like for us to continue to live in to doing that every single day of the year. And wanting to bring that together with our theme for today, about waking up. Because in reality, it's still true that throughout the world in 95% of pulpits, Christian churches, that there are no female-bodied people who are allowed to preach.

That's a lot. Maybe today on Mother's Day, as the one special set apart day. 975 But I wonder what we might learn and lean into from this passage with the story of Saul, because in many ways, the history of the Christian Church has been one in which we've been sure we've gotten things right. We've been sure that we've had our letters to say, no, I know for sure God is on my side. And then we engage with one another in ways that don't affirm the image of God or the lifeblood that is in each of our bodies and in each of our skin. And this passage with Saul is this moment where he's going along so sure, so convinced that he's right and God shows up and basically is like, no, you're not right. What I love in this passage. And as I was retranslating it, I intentionally kept the word "Lord."

It's a word that I don't use in my general life conversation. I don't walk around "Lord this, Lord that," but I kept it in there intentionally because not only is it in the text, but it's an affirmation when Saul sees the slight and he says, my Lord, he's acknowledging that there is a power that is greater, that is outside of him, that he needs to honor, right? It's not Caesar, it's not the king, but there's something important and sacred that happens. And the word Lord is also evocative of the long Jewish tradition of naming God Yahweh. God is the one who is the ground of being, the way that we exist, the air that we breathe, and Saul in this moment is encountered. And basically realizes, maybe I'm not the one with the arrows flaming in my hands, like this first song reminded us where I think I'm the little God who is controlling everything right, Brennan?

Actually I'm invited to wake up and recognize that there might be a different way to live and a different way to see things. I also really appreciate that in this passage, Ananias doesn't want to go, right? He seems like an actually a very smart guy. Like why would I want to intentionally go and encounter this person who's literally trying to kill me? Seems very reasonable. But this guy who's on the street named Straight, the street named Straight, evocative a little bit of straight and narrow, maybe. That's where he finds this person and immediately the scales fall from Saul's eyes. And he sees, he sees anew, he sees the world aright. And I wonder likewise, what it might mean for us to be people who keep leaning in to seeing the world and waking up anew. We have lived in the midst of a Christian story in which up until this day, not all bodies and not all people are seen as equally human or valued as being equally human or treated as such.

And I really don't get why it's such a radical idea to think that maybe we should be the people who are about treating everyone like they're made in the image of God and seeing one another and honoring one another and not killing one another because who knows what reason from long ago made us think that we're not all equal. Because at the center of our faith is a story of a God who formed every single person in God's image. Do you know that in the ancient, near Eastern creation stories, which is the Jewish story in Genesis, in the ancient near east, this story is the only one in which women are created,

and created as not some like afterthought or toxic thing, but are actually 976 named as being formed also in the creation and as part of being made in God's image? Jesus comes to earth and sees everyone, calls people down from trees, sees folks who've been ostracized from community. And then in the early church, we see these examples and witnesses where men and women, people, all of them in their bodies and in their skin, as we talked about in Acts 2 they hear the good news and their speaking it. Should we not then likewise, as the church in our time, be a people who live and embody that kind of good news. Now, maybe all of you're like, yes, Sara, I've already thought this like forever. Well, great. Then let this be an encouraging word to you this morning to keep leaning in.

What would it mean? What does it look like for us to not just have a day set apart where bodies, and then in fact, actually particular women's bodies, ones who have birthed or are mothers, what does it mean for all of our bodies every single day to be seen, to be safe, to be cared for, to be loved? This week my Instagram, with all of my stories was filled with a lot of women I know, and people with uterus who are grieving a lot. Now, I recognize that in our church, we have different thoughts about how we orient to the modern day political conversation about being pro-life or pro-choice.

I'm not here to tell you which of those political positions to hold, because I think they both have problems anyway, but I'm here to reinvite us in that time when I saw my Instagram blowing up with grief and fear to ask, what does it mean to be the church in that space? Are we to be the people who set apart one day to honor, but then the other days, hold up stones that we throw at one another, or get our letters from the high priest, because I can tell you, I know you're wrong and you deserve to come to harm because of it. Or will we be a people who like Jesus, say "lay down the stones" and instead seek to foster a world in which all of us have life and are seen.

I grew up inside of a religious community that was very political. And for me to grow up, as I grew up to be Christian was to be Republican. When I was 14 years old, little Sarah, you may have heard this before. I wrote a speech for my speech class. And I said, if you want to stop abortions, then don't call kids from single parent families bastards at church, which was what I was called. Don't talk about women who are on welfare as being welfare queens. Don't tell an eight-year-old she's going to be pregnant by the time she's 14, because her mom was a single parent. What does it mean for us? Wherever you end up in your political positions for each of our political positions to be rooted and grounded in the faith of the God who has formed and created all of us and to then be a people who refuse to take letters to other towns so we can harm one another. But instead are people who say, let the scales fall off. Let's love one another. Let's create a world in which each of our bodies, whatever our genders, whatever is going on, that we can be honored that we foster relationships and partnerships where not only one person knows how to orient

the dishwasher, unless that's your choice, because you know like y'all like one of you does the dishwasher and the other does, I don't know the garbage disposal, I don't know how those are equal. I don't know. I just pulled that one out, Damon, right?

Because part of what I love about this story is that Saul is encountered by God. Faith isn't a set of rules that we follow but is an invitation to let ourselves in our bodies, in our skin, be encountered by the God of the universe and reminded that we are loved. And I'm a deep believer that as we do that inner work, as we are encountered, as we let those scales fall away and let ourselves be loved, it allows us to truly actually love one another. To be a people who are committed to enacting in the world, the world we've already known inside ourselves, right? If God looks at each of us and says, I see you, you are beloved. And if we actually begin to believe that in our bones, how can we not then turn to one another and say, I will fight to the death for a world in which you get to be seen, in which you get to be safe, in which you get to be known in your own skin, and together, let us build this beloved community following after the Jesus who still meets us on the streets, who still meets us in the dailiness of our lives. What does it mean for us to be this kind of people, a people who keep waking up, and waking up anew and again, a people who refuse to live inside of small narratives of political partisanship, but bear witness to another kingdom.

A kingdom of love, a kingdom that is for all of us, because just again, to tell you what I know some really liberal men who don't like women. So just to be clear here, this isn't like Republicans and Democrats. This is about how do we lean into the way of Jesus. How do we look and see one another and see the image of God? And how do we then also be the church that comes alongside of those in our world, who are the most marginalized, the most vulnerable and say, we're going to be found there because that's where Jesus is because each of us deserves to live with dignity and to be honored every single day of every single year. Might we indeed be a people who continue to wake up. Might we be a people who continue to love and in any of the places where we need some scales to fall, because I know I will keep needing them to fall from my eyes for the rest of my life, might we be re-encountered. Will you pray with me.

God, on this day, I pray that you would meet each of us as you met Saul those many years ago. God, the places in our world where fear and certainty prevents us from being able to actually turn to one another with love and compassion. God, might you open us that we would know ourselves in our stories and deepest places of shame that we would know ourselves as loved. And in that way that we might be the church, a church that is known not for rules we follow not for stones that we throw, but for being a people who like you are willing to lay down our lives, put our bodies in the space in between and say, we are committed to a world in which the image of God is honored, in

each of your children by your spirit. Give us strengths to be the church and to be a people who continue to awaken. We give you thanks for your great love. It's in your name that we gather and pray, amen.

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VITA

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Rev. Dr. Sara Wilhelm Garbers graduated from the University of Minnesota-Duluth with a major in Communications and minor in Women's Studies. She has been involved in professional church ministry since college and has long had a passion for gender equality and the church.

With over ten years in leadership roles in theological education, Rev. Dr. Sara Wilhelm Garbers brings together theological ethics with embodied praxis. Rev. Dr. Sara Wilhelm Garbers has their Master of Divinity from Bethel Seminary and is completing her doctorate in Integrative Studies in Ethics and theology at Loyola University Chicago. Their academic interests are at the intersection of feminism and theological ethics.

Rev. Dr. Sara Wilhelm Garbers currently serves as the Senior Associate Minister at Meetinghouse Church in Edina, Minnesota. She lives in St. Louis Park with their spouse, kid, and other beloved family and friends.