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The Journey: Spiritual Sojourns

When considering where to begin and how to express a lifetime's worth of experiences that have contributed to a faith pilgrimage—inside and outside the church, occurrences and opportunities that helped me come to an understanding of God and aided in shaping my own Christian faith - it seems a bit difficult to enumerate or sequence. A relationship with God, and the very process of life itself, is entirely individually experiential. How we come to know things can also grow in us in ways that are far more spiritual than they are cognitively rational, akin to a personal gnosticism or sense of knowing, if you will. In that same way, God speaks to us through the Holy Spirit and we are formed and taught the ways of life—and, yes, it is difficult to convey the complexity with which that experience occurred within me. Yet, here is some background from my life history.

I am the youngest of seven children and we grew up in Manchester, CT. My early church experiences included being baptized in a Catholic church, going to church with my family, and while on weekends spent with my beloved Grandma Midge. There are memories I will treasure of those days, though all that ended by the age of six when divorce split my family, and the church in-turn split on my family. So, as far as church attendance goes there is a literally a forty-year gap. Then came that fateful and faith-filled day when I walked into Storrs Congregational Church (SCC), United Church of Christ (UCC) walking alone and carrying my somewhat tattered, somewhat well-read Bible in hand. I wasn't *entirely* sure where the next part of my spiritual journey would take me, though I knew I was ready to follow Christ in a new and profound way. Looking back over my lifetime there were many moments and events of my early twenties that impacted me along the way of discovery. The inner exploration for a deeper meaning of life led me to a new path: a path that was more compassionate, loving, and kind than the church of my childhood.

During my twenties I looked to Native traditions of spirit in all things; I explored new age philosophies of rocks, crystals, and alignment of chakras. Growing more mindful of the problems of the world and the suffering of so many people in it I looked to Buddhism for contemplation and inner peace. Later in life I once visited a Jewish temple and “listened” to ancient language and learned of the profound depth of culture and customs. I allowed myself to open to both new age philosophies and age-old traditions that explore, attempt to explain, and ever strive to communicate with the unknowable source of all life, and creation itself. None of these experiences were a distraction. They provided me with skills of acute clarity along the path to God. They were, in fact, very influential in helping me find my way back to the loving Jesus I remember from those early days. Most importantly, I learned it is the desire to discover, and the action of seeking connection to God and spirit, that makes humans so unique, which is one reason for my great respect of interfaith work.

Through these explorations, I came to desire a walk with God. It helped me feel whole and at one with all creation—nature and humankind alike. I began to study the Word, watched many sermons, prayed earnestly, and strengthened my relationship with the God of love. You see, I had learned a lot about God and the creation of energy when tuning into my body’s intuition during those days of a spiritual quest. I had learned about the mental health qualities of mindful meditation and Christ’s peace when discovering the ways of Buddhists and the freedom of letting go of that which does not serve. I had learned even more about how God uses balance, harmony, and ethics through the way of the Tao. Most importantly, I learned how God uses *all* things for God’s good purpose. I believe God speaks many spiritual languages and had to use a few of them to get through to me. My journey back to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob came in a reawakening *to* and *through* the love and teachings of *Jesus Christ*.

The Call: Why Ministry, Why Me?

My journey began as my own path to enlightenment and hunger for knowledge, yet it wasn't long thereafter that I realized it was not only meant for my own edification. Growing in my relationship with God I have learned to listen to the still, small voice that God uses to speak with us all. Reflecting on the beautiful, painful, joyful journey that has opened me up to answering the call that I have left on hold for so long, I now feel that I am in a place that God can use me best. This "place" comes *at* and *for* a time such as this. Through the grace of a sociological education, a passion for social and racial justice, and a love for people, whether hurting or happy, I believe God has prepared me to serve in more profound ways. Over the last thirteen years God has allowed me to be filled with knowledge, perspective, and spirit to fulfill something far greater. On more than one occasion, I have heard Rev. Dorhauer say, "you cannot fully imagine what you will experience after your 'yes' to answering the call to ministry." Of course, I am open to serve in whatever capacity the Lord sees fit, ordained or otherwise.

Having spent several years involved in active nonviolence training and anti-war activism along with social justice and environmental movements, I know there is much work to be done, and I am willing to do it. I am willing to do my part. I am willing to follow the call and lead a church through ordained ministry. The call to ministry can be complicated and confounding, especially if one feels like Moses and says, "who am I that I should go...?" That is why we need faith. Ministers, just like everybody else, need to rely on faith. Like Moses, I needed more "signs," more proof. God has indeed provided many unmistakable signs as to God's power and presence along the way and supplied provisions when it looked like there was no way. Understanding that mystery of faith and being comfortable in the discomfort of unknowing is crucial and perhaps an imperative for ministry. Why me? Why did God show me the way toward Jesus? Why did the power of Christ help me to quit smoking? Why did God use me to change the heart of an angry young man that day? Why has

God worked through others to provide me a college education when I had no money, simply a desire to seek an unbreakable bond with God through Christ? The answers to these questions and testimony like this requires the particularity of my own voice and are stories best told in person. And I, like Moses, have found the courage to speak for I know God is with me.

As Marcus Borg writes about in “The Heart of Christianity,” I needed to reflect on the character of God, the nature of who God is, which has helped me to best understand ministry. From personal experience I know the church has the power to hurt or to heal. And, I know that as long as God is with me, speaking through me, they will be words of love. I want to let God use my voice to speak to the many walking, wounded hearts both in the church and in the world. As Chicago Theological Seminary student, Raven Clarissa Rowe, so eloquently stated at Rev. John C. Dorhauer’s Chicago installation service as UCC General Minister and President in April of 2017, “the church has the power to harm or to heal, to tear down or to lift up, to cast out or to invite in.” As an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ I would want to make sure that the people I serve know that *this* church is a place that heals, lifts up, and invites in everyone. Further, I would implore the congregation to know it is their goal and call to make sure *they* are a congregation that heals, lifts up, and invites in.

The UCC & Me

The journey through the Member in Discernment (MID) process has been enlightening, enriching, and vital to the development of a foundation upon which to build an informed, healthy, and engaging ministry. My faith journey over my life course, along with my spiritual practices and academic endeavors, have come together from a variety of religious beliefs, contemplative practices, and lived experiences in a way that is sure to enhance my ability to meet people where they are on their faith walk. It is also through, and because of, my varied and long path that I can appreciate the

history, compilation, and complexity of the United Church of Christ (UCC). The many layers of UCC history from the Reformation along with the rich cultural heritage brought by Christians throughout the globe have come together to form a vastly diverse church with an intent to venerate both foundational Christian unity *and* honoring individual, cultural church autonomy.

The UCC, its Polity & Autonomy

“The essence of true religion is the feeling of absolute dependence” –Friederich Schleiermacher

It seems to me the feeling of absolute dependence is not on the religion itself, yet on a religious body that rests *its* reliance on God. Somewhere in that dependence is the reliance that God is sovereign in our midst. God is not solely outside of our existence, but present within it. In the UCC, this sentiment is acknowledged through our belief that God is still speaking and that Jesus is the head of the church. In this way, and throughout its history, the UCC has earnestly incorporated a mindset that embraces the complexity of humanity, the lived human experience, and expansive cultural diversity as a means by which to create a covenant polity, a unified church, and the freedom of individuality.

Randi Jones Walker, in *The Evolution of a UCC Style*, writes about what she calls the four-church myth in the formation of the United Church of Christ. However, it may be more of a misnomer than it is a myth. The longer history from the early days of the Reformation were influenced by theologians and Protestants from Switzerland, Scandinavia, and other European locales (ucc.org). And, we, the UCC today, are an amalgamation of beliefs and a varied body of believers. This is where the richness and fullness of our church history breathes life into the UCC as a whole, along with the individuality of belief among its members today. While all of this is true, it all comes with the understanding and firm belief that Jesus Christ is the sole head of the church, and the desire that we may all be one. As the UCC came into formal existence in 1957, it brought with it

the idea of fullness when embracing traditional church values while holding the concept that there are many styles of expression—ways to worship and live out their faith.

One important aspect of the UCC, which I highly value, is the fluidity within the structure and its bottom-up (as opposed to top-down) formation. Those of us in the MID process know this full-well, as it is a local group of church folks that hold the power and responsibility to ordain ministers for the entire denomination. The individual churches retain their own autonomy regarding what they do and how they do it, including their internal governance model. Certainly, there are some parameters such as being in covenantal relationship with the UCC and the qualification of ordained or licensed ministers. It is the regional Associations that hold the power to ordain ministers for the entire UCC. As the local clergy and lay delegates that form these Associations come together and develop personal, professional relationships with each other and their MID's it keeps power at the local association level to make such important decisions for qualified ministers.

The long history and varied churches that make up the UCC all contribute to my understanding and practice of pastoral authority. When entering any of the UCC churches it is imperative to learn about the cultural identity that makes up that individual, autonomous church body. The value of meeting people where they are is particularly prominent in the UCC because of the fluidity of the denomination to allow for autonomy of each church. Pastoral authority at the association and conference level are of great interest to me because I believe a healthy ministry must remain in contact and relationship with the wider church. As the wider church meets at General Synods, ministers and lay leaders can gain comprehensive understanding about goals and aspirations at the denominational level. With this knowledge each pastor has an opportunity to bring such information to the local church for them to discern what, when, where, and how they might engage in such initiatives. As one with pastoral authority within a local church, good leaders can inform and educate their congregation as to the reasoning behind any of the initiatives put forth at General

Synod. By so doing, each congregation can choose for themselves what is a good and right fit for them, which allows for their own autonomy. Each church has the autonomy of an individual identity, the freedom to express it in ways that are meaningful for their members, and each has a voting voice within the wider denomination of the United Church of Christ at General Synod.

Judgement and Grace

My personal theology of judgement and grace, revealed to us through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, filled with the unending love of God who seeks us out over and over again, and received in us through the work of the Holy Spirit, are interwoven and inseparable. The depth of judgement I have felt and the height of grace I have received at certain times in my life have profoundly impacted how I understand the concepts of judgement and grace forever more. The ways I have come to know God's grace has sincerely altered the way I perceive God's judgement. The interplay of judgement and grace in someone's life, my life anyway, has profound effects on the way judgement is perceived and in the future. This provides a secure foundation in which to move through life, grow in faith, and live in a manner that demonstrates acceptance and grace of other people.

My theology of judgement and grace are deeply rooted in three areas: scripture and sacred texts, storytelling, and prayer. Further, my understanding of judgement and grace stem from my perception of God's love for all people, Jesus' actions toward people and communities, and my own experience as a person of faith. My experiences with the God of love on my own spiritual journey, as well as the grace received from people who have demonstrated God's loving grace along the way, are integral to the core of my faith walk. My perception of God's judgement and grace for all people, as individuals and as a communal body, are also bound up in the idea that followers of Jesus have

the pleasure and the responsibility to reflect and discern our actions, come to a place of greater understanding, and demonstrates growth in relationship with God and with one another.

Repeatedly in biblical texts, the expressions of a speaking God came through the prophets to speak to the people about what they have been doing, how God had judged those actions, and a stern call to stop and change the way they were doing things, along with a reminder that this judgement comes from a loving God. They come as words of guidance from a loving God that wants what is best for them. What I find most striking about this repeated cycle is that people continue to mess up, and God continues to speak guidance, continually expressing a reassurance of love. This is the cycle. It is a rhythm that still beats in the heart of the church. What is not specifically stated in this repeated pattern, however, is that once the judgement and guidance come from God, what exactly should the people do about it? That's where we come in. Clearly, there is an expectation that change is needed, discernment is expected, and a new attempt will be made to follow the call of God. Old patterns need to be followed by new beginnings. *And*, there comes a renewed reminder of a covenant relationship with the God of love.

Many theologians have had, and continue to have, so much to say about the in-between, unwritten, yet fully understood to exist middle phase. Like the unwritten hyphen between judgement and grace, there is assurance grace will come after the judgement. But, how do we get from judgement *to* grace? As children of God, we have a role to play. Dietrich Bonhoeffer had much to say about "cheap grace." Cheap grace is the idea that God loves and forgives no matter what you do, so go ahead and live it up however you want to, no matter what and with no consideration of what God is asking of us. It seems to me, that kind of faith doesn't need grace—and doesn't reflect much reverence to God either. I agree that as followers of the Christian faith, we are called to a more "costly grace." But it is not the legalistic, crime and punishment model of the church of my youth. It is not the "you've done this wrong thing so now you must do this other thing" to show your

obedience to the priest and be accepted back to God after your punishment debt has been paid in full. True grace is a costly grace, not one we pay for out of shame and obedience, but out of gratitude for wholeness. Timothy J Keller agrees with Bonhoeffer's "costly grace" perception and goes further to say:

“But we know that true grace comes to us by costly sacrifice. And if God was willing to go to the cross and endure such pain and absorb such a cost in order to save us, then we must live sacrificially to serve others. Anyone who truly understands how God's grace comes to us will have a changed life. That's the gospel, not salvation by law, or by cheap grace, but by costly grace. Costly grace changes you from the inside out. Neither law nor cheap grace can do that.”

In the church we talk about the joy and cost of discipleship, and what it means to live out our faith responsibly. In order to do this we must look at the world around us and directly connect what we see to what it is that God is calling us to do about that which we see. Action follows discernment.

In the Hebrew scriptures, God's judgement was placed on communities, nation-states, and groups of people. It wasn't so much about individual judgement or salvation, it was about communal judgement, communal restoration, and God's grace for the communal body of people. From the early stories of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt to the Song of Hannah to psalms like Psalm 146, we are reminded over and over again that our hope is in the Lord. We are reminded that God's concern is for the poor and oppressed—not just those in power who create and uphold systems of inequity. These stories are God's judgement and grace revealed. So, if the judgement comes to illumine systems of harm to groups of people, which is the basis for liberation theology, then God's proclamation to change course is a call to recommit and reprioritize based on those who are adversely affected by such systems.

The call is to create God's kingdom on earth. It is God's call to create beloved community. In my constructive theology master's thesis I wrote about beloved community and what it means to

live as grace for one another. One place I witnessed such grace was during my Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) unit at Illinois Masonic Medical Center, which is a level-one trauma center and hospital in Chicago. During my chaplaincy I was able to witness multiple acts of lovingkindness and the profound effect it has on the people who receive it. I came to understand how beautiful it is when people come together, bringing their skills, talents, and hearts of compassion to help someone who is hurting. I saw the positive effects in people's lives when they receive grace and care instead of judgement. As part of the trauma response team I offered spiritual care to people who were going through one of the most difficult experiences they might ever have in their lives. I was fortunate to witness firsthand how living as grace in a trauma-informed community can impact people's lives for the good. As people were receiving physical and spiritual care I saw a return to wholeness that revealed the Divine at work. When people live out their daily lives with a focus of being grace for one another and taking actions that fully demonstrate grace in their interactions it is possible to see a glimpse of God's kin-dom in our own earthly lives. It is possible when we follow the pattern of listening for God's judgement, responding to God's call, and receiving God's profound grace as we go forward.

Sin, Repentance, and Forgiveness

Just as judgement and grace can be applied to groups of people, so too can theologies of sin, repentance, and forgiveness. Sin happens both collectively and individually. Reinhold Niebuhr professed: "The inevitable hypocrisy, which is associated with all the collective activities of the human race, springs chiefly from this source: that individuals have a moral code which makes the actions of collective man an outrage to their conscience." Niebuhr had a detailed critique of collective sin in his work, "Moral Man and Immoral Society." Niebuhr understood that it is within the collective society that people will act out their inner sinful thoughts against others. But I say,

societal sin must be called out for what it is on the public square, from the pulpit, and in the offices of political leaders. Immoral actions that go against divine law exist in individual human behavior and have sometimes been displayed at their worst in collective behavior. Whether sin is individual or communal, the results can diminish, disintegrate, and sometimes destroy the body. However, with sincere, intentional repentance and a surfeit of forgiveness, life can be made whole once again.

In Psalm 51 the writer exclaims to God that sin is against God alone. That is not my theology. I believe any time a person commits an act that goes against another person, against themselves, against nature, OR against God, it is a sin. Even when the sin is communal there needs to be a personal response. Prayer offers an opportunity to reflect on such things. There is an opportunity to soften the heart. And, there is an opportunity to discern a response. This response is a plan of repentance. A contrite heart is able to set a path toward God's call to create beloved community in the world. In prayer and times of discernment come the pangs of conscience. This process is imperative to living out our faith. It inspires us. It also exposes our vulnerability and opens us up to receive forgiveness, so that we can walk humbly with our God, show mercy, and do justice, as we are called to do in this world.

There is a reason church worship often begins with the pattern of a call to worship, a prayer of confession and guidance, and is followed by an assurance of pardon. It models the pattern of acknowledging sin, calling for repentance, and the receiving of forgiveness. This is a model for a life of faith. This model, however, is all about the process. In the same way we shouldn't jump straight to grace, we cannot skip right to forgiveness. It takes away the meaningfulness of relationship to God. In Genesis 18, Abraham repeatedly bargains with God saying if there is only a small group of righteous people then forgive the "whole place." And, God forgives. Throughout the bible the sacred texts proclaim in Exodus, Nehemiah, Joel, Psalms, Micah, Romans, Ephesians, and other places that God is ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, abounding in steadfast love. Yes, it's true,

God is ready to forgive. But human beings have a responsibility too. We must do our part. Faithful followers of Jesus, the Galilean sage, are called to look at what is happening to people around us, acknowledge what is causing hardship (or harm), repent and react so that *when* we receive forgiveness, we receive its fullness and continue in joyful relationship with God. God's love and forgiveness are fully available and freely given. Yes! Therefore, we yearn to listen as God is still speaking.

As Christians, we would not be doing justice to the one who hung it all on the cross for the forgiveness of sin if we are not actively participating in the entire process. It is imperative to move from sin into repentance, and then onto forgiveness. God's love and mercy are revealed throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. In the pastoral letter of 1Colossians the writer proclaims Christ Jesus is the image of the invisible God and the fullness of God dwelled within him. Jesus' divinity is evidenced in his actions as he followed the same pattern as the prophets revealed God's proclamations. Jesus called out the Pharisees, religious and other legal authorities, as well as individuals, told them when he thought their actions or thinking were amiss, called for repentance, and provided them assurance that their sins were forgiven and that they were loved by God. Jesus' divinity is also revealed in Mark 1:15 as Jesus proclaims "...the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (NRSV). Jesus taught, fed, healed, blessed, loved, and forgave people throughout his earthly ministry and continues to do so today.

The fullness of God was embodied in Jesus the Christ, and through our union as the body of Christ, the church, we have been afforded the forgiveness of sin. I will never forget one of the most dramatic responses to Divine forgiveness I have ever witnessed. After having been a member of the local church and while I was enrolled in the Women's Leadership Institute at Hartford Seminary a young man came into the office of company we worked for and asked if he could talk to me. His face was red, he was visibly shaking, and had a terrified look in his eyes. I invited him into the inner

office where we could close the door for privacy. I asked what was going on with him and how can I help. "Aaron" began by saying he didn't know who else he could talk to and told me I was the only person he knew who was close with God. Aaron was very upset and truly afraid that God would strike his mother dead because of his sin. You see, Aaron had lied to his girlfriend and sworn on his mother's life that he hadn't done something. But he had done it. He lied to her about it. And, he was sure that because his boldfaced lie God would in fact take his mother's life. Aaron was trembling with fear. He was afraid of God. He was certain he put his mother at risk, and his guilt would be unbearable if something had happened to her.

We talked for a while. I asked him if he really believed God would exact such a punishment for telling a lie. We talked about how his beliefs were formed and if it was possible to see things differently. I offered pastoral care and talked about the nature of God as I know it, as well as the saving grace of forgiveness of sin through Jesus Christ. I'll always remember that exchange for two reasons. One, it was the first time anyone ever came to me because of my relationship with God. Two, I witnessed of the dramatic change in Aaron's countenance after our discussion. This young man had gone from trembling with fear to comfort in coming to recognize that God understands, loves, and forgives. I was able to offer pastoral care to Aaron that day based on my theology of sin repentance and forgiveness. I believe we both left feeling something powerful had just happened. The Holy Spirit was with us and through Christ I know we are forgiven.

The Church and God's New Era

By utilizing the gifts of God, the Church has the opportunity and responsibility to continue Christ's mission in the world. This can be accomplished through active mission and social justice action. The act of evangelizing, however, is a more nuanced topic, in my opinion, based on some of the ways the mission industrial complex operates in different places around the world. That

acknowledgement comes with its own set of responsibilities in *how* a church, or any organization, engages in mission work. Yet, creating mission ministries that provide people with food, clothing, education, bedding, and shelter are active and tangible ways we can show the love we have for God—as well as the love we know in Christ.

Seeing the Sacred in every person and meeting people’s needs is fundamental to my theology of mission and social action. Through the recognition of seeing God in another’s eyes, along with my sociological background, I feel a strong call to social justice on both the macro and micro level. Yes, create mission ministries on the local, community, and immediate need level. Also, work actively toward changing structures and policies that maintain systems of inequity. Racial justice, economic justice, environmental justice, and gender justice issues are all areas of concern in striving to create God’s kingdom on earth. The possibility of seeing God’s New Era during this lifetime keeps me hopeful and energized for the work—even if I only catch a glimpse of it while serving the community alongside churchmates.

As much as I believe churches need to lead the way toward progressive social action in multiple ways and on multiple levels, perhaps the local church needs to first be sure each person who enters the church knows that they are loved. People who come into the church need to know they have entered a safe place and know that they are *wholly* loved by the church community, and *holly* beloved by God. Historically, the Church has done its share of harm in the world; biblical texts had been weaponized to send messages of support for slavery, preachers would tell abused women to obey their husbands, missionaries were instrumental in colonization, “Indian” schools abused and traumatized children, LGBTQ folks have been shunned and shamed. These are just a few examples of what Teresa B. Pasquale calls “sacred wounds.” The Church along with individual Christian folks have left a host of trauma victims in their wake. Misplaced theology is harmful theology. It is no wonder that church participation is down and that many young adults are not drawn to the

institutional church. Some good news comes from the fact that contemporary, progressive churches can come together and boldly proclaim the sacred value of every human, and partake in holy mischief to disrupt systems and ideologies that say otherwise.

One of the times I participated in holy mischief was during seminary while among a diverse set of believers, with very different lived experiences. Together, we traveled and studied along the U.S.-Mexico borderlands in an effort to immerse ourselves into issues of migration. We met with progressive peers who are doing the boots-on-the-ground work in communities on both sides of the border. We also met with migrants and asylum seekers who spoke their truth about their experiences, even when their voices were still shaking in fear. As a group of religious scholars, and as just plain people who care about other people, we explored how the lived experiences of these migrants intersected with our faith.

What does our faith say we are to do when someone is tired, dirty, hungry, or even dying of thirst? How can we model Christ when we meet such folks? One day we hiked into the Sonoran Desert in Arizona providing humanitarian aid for people who were in such conditions. We brought water, food, and feminine hygiene products and placed them along the trail. One such place was a secluded spot among the rock formations where people had burned candles, spoken prayers, and left sacred ritual and personal items as a sign of their hope in the God of love—even in their desperate state. In that moment we were in embodied solidarity with those who had traveled this path. We saw evidence of their fear and came to understand their trauma in a deeply personal way. In the Gospel of Thomas from the Nag Hammadi scriptures, Saying 22 says: “Jesus said to them: When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer, and the upper like the lower, and when you make male and female into a single one...then you will enter the kingdom.” My heart melted there in the desert, on that sacred spot of ritual practice, where hurting people looked to God for compassion, and found food, water, and supplies to meet their need. God met them there, and

so did we. It may have been illegal to give someone water, yet we did it because that is what kin-dom looks like.

If the Church is really to live into God's New Era, perhaps it must first live as and look like the kin-dom of God. One way to begin the journey toward the kin-dom may be for the local church to heal the sacred wounds of its own people. And, one way to begin that work is to become trauma-informed congregations. Trauma-informed congregations demonstrate love for all when they understand, communicate, and acknowledge that other peoples' lived experiences are different from their own, and that everyone has had adverse experiences impact their lives. A successful trauma-informed congregation practices a key perspective shift from before they became trauma-informed and when they practice self-regulation. They also actively build and sustain relationships, maintain a sense of purpose as a group, and recognize that practicing care means being personally impacted by other persons' traumatic experiences. Demonstrating this level of active sensitivity and compassion is the kind of trauma-informed church that can transform the people in the congregation, the community in which they live, and maybe even the world.

There is something profound that happens when people recognize someone else's pain and see the pain in someone else's eyes. We can see our own pain. We remember our pain and it reminds us that we are all one. We are one in our weakness therefore we can become one in sharing our strength, compassion, and wisdom. When a congregation speaks to each other from that understanding, they learn to live as grace for one another, become stronger and healthier as one body, and are filled with a sense of purpose.

Once a church comes together with that level of compassion and puts it to work in their outreach ministries and social justice action, surely, we will get a glimpse of God's New Era coming into being. A grounded and fired-up church can have a tremendous impact on a community as they meet the needs of the people among and around them. Then, we can fling wide the doors. Then, we

can provide warming centers and feeding programs. Then, we can take to streets calling for justice. Then, the church can live into its Christian commitments to care for the sick and elderly, feed the hungry, fight against systems of oppression and poverty, and clothe the naked among us. To me, *this* is the only way to evangelize. Let our acts of compassion preach for us. Then, we can see the vision of God's New Era.

Reflecting on the theological frameworks of judgement and grace; sin, repentance, and forgiveness; and the Church and God's New Era in the world helps to reify my call to parish ministry. Together, even in their brief iterations, these concepts express my theological views in a way that encapsulates how I vision the world can be experienced when Christian faith is at the forefront of being. If we observe the world around us through the lens of our faith, and base our thoughts and actions from that perspective, I believe life can be very fulfilling—even in the striving. Doing our part in the world because we feel called by God to do it, seeing each other as ourselves, and knowing all the while God is full of love and grace for us until the end of our days is a life worth living.