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Ordination Paper

“Lord, you now have set your servant free
to go in peace as you have promised;
For these eyes of mine have seen the Savior,
whom you have prepared for all the world to see:
A Light to enlighten the nations,
and the glory of your people Israel.”¹

These words in the book of Luke were spoken by Simeon, a devout Jew who had been promised by God that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. When Mary and Joseph brought the infant Jesus into the temple for the Ceremony of Consecration of the First-Born Son, Simeon took the baby Jesus into his arms and uttered these words.

These words are also found in the Order of Compline within the Book of Common Prayer. My husband, an Episcopal priest, and I maintain a spiritual practice of reciting Compline each night before bed. I have often wondered how these words, that are personal to one person in the Bible and reference a particular point in time, made their way into an order of worship that is used regularly by Christians around the world. After reciting these words nightly, allowing them to soak in and take on meaning within my own context, I realize how profound and expansive they are. In saying, “Lord, you now have set your servant free”, I realize that I am that servant. That I have been set free; not once, but over and over. I am set free as often as I dare to utter the words to remind myself that I am set free. The following phrase spoken by Simeon has become for me a daily challenge: “for these eyes of mine have seen the Savior.”

¹ Luke 2:29-32 (New International Version).

Where have I seen the Savior today? Where has God shown up - God who is already present but asks only to be recognized to be known?

This practice of reciting Compline reminds me of the power of ritual, both on an individual and community level. When I say the Lord's Prayer each Sunday at worship or read aloud the lectionary texts, I feel as if I am joining a vast community of witnesses – those near and those far, those I know and those I can never know.

As a seminary student, my favorite theological concept was the Scandal of Particularity - the idea that Christ came at only one time and place on earth, but nevertheless his intervention is for all times and all places. This is a profound concept that speaks to both the immanence and omniscience of God, as well as God's mystery and God's power to speak for all of time. Often when I enter a ritual at church, either the reciting of the Lord's prayer or the lighting of a candle, this ritual is resonant with the Scandal of Particularity. God speaks through ordinary actions, and through recitation ordinary actions begin to speak for community.

Several years ago, I was the Pastoral Leader for the L'Arche community in Cleveland, an intentional community for adults with and without disabilities. Soon after I started, a beloved member of the community passed away, an adult with Down syndrome and dementia named Shawn. I visited him often while he was in the care of hospice. At times I was there by myself, though often I was joined by members of L'Arche's wider community. One night, as many as nine people came by to be with Shawn. We crammed together in the small hospice room and encircled his bedside. While Shawn was nearing the end and no longer aware of his environment, the presence of so many people provided comfort to those holding vigil. I felt the strong need to honor the moment with words, but in my own grief could find none. I relied instead on the Lord's Prayer, which was known by all in L'Arche Cleveland and was used often

to close out our meetings. But spoken here, around the bedside of a dying man we all cherished and loved, the words of this prayer took on a deeper meaning and resonance. We were no longer nine individuals overwhelmed by our pain and grief; we became a small community buoyed by our entry into a sacred space. God entered into our pain and grief, and through the power of ritual reminded us of our membership in God's beloved community.

This, for me, is the power of ritual – to imbue a moment with power, to invoke a space of liminality, and to claim the presence of the Holy Spirit that can be felt but cannot be named in words. In the moment of standing around Shawn's hospice bed, the Lord's Prayer created a resting place for our complicated feelings of grief. Grief can be alienating; at times it can trigger small silos of seclusion to process its many tunnels. But shared ritual reminds us of the web we are all a part.

When moments are too overwhelming for words, rituals allow us to find voice for our emotions and to participate in a process of meaning-making. As Paul wrote in I Corinthians, "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."² Ritual allows us to enter deeper into the not-yet-known, the "in-between spaces" of liminality that are beyond human understanding. In these spaces we can sit in the mystery and transcendence of God. I once knew a chaplain who would stop and take off his shoes outside the hospital room when he came to deliver the last rites to a patient. He mimicked Moses as Moses was told by God to "take off your sandals, for the place you are standing on is holy ground."³ This chaplain knew the power of the moment and did his best to honor it, even without fully understanding the how or why.

² I Corinthians 13:12 (New International Version).

³ Exodus 3:5 (NIV).

The Protestant Church, of which the United Church of Christ is a part, recognizes two sacraments. These are ritual acts within worship which were instituted by Christ according to Scripture. While entire books have and could be written about the power of these two sacraments individually, I will write about them jointly as they are connected in my mind and have a special shared significance.

First, baptism and holy communion assume the power of ritual to enter into liminal spaces, and the power to transform the mundane into transformative acts of God. Through sacrament, we transform the ordinary elements of water, bread, and wine into the outward symbols of God's presence, grace, and forgiveness. Through sacrament we make visible what is invisible, and by so doing proclaim the gifts that God has given us freely.

These two sacraments work in tandem. Baptism is an act entered into only once. Communion is repeated; it is a reminder of our baptism, as well as an invitation to join Christ at his table over and over again. A professor in seminary referred to baptism as the wedding, and communion as the acts of ritual significance that take shape in a marriage to remind the couple of their bond. Through communion, our baptism takes on new meaning.

The United Church of Christ has an open communion table; all are welcome to receive the Lord's Supper. Communion belongs to God and not to the church or pastor or the individual servers. Just as we affirm everyone is welcome in our church, so must everyone be welcome to receive the gifts of God. At St. Paul's Community Church where I am currently serving as Associate Pastor, the sanctuary is arranged so that the communion table is prominent. The pews are arranged in a semicircle around the table. This physical arrangement of our space serves as a visible reminder that sacraments, just like the grace of God, are accessible to all equally. One does not need to be "right" with God to receive the sacrament. God's grace is a gift freely given

to all, and equally accessible to all. It is conferred, not earned; easily given but hard to comprehend.

This radical grace of the communion table is displayed each week in the worship at St. Paul's. Our services are often spontaneous, and communion-servers are chosen either just before service or in the moment. As we prepare the elements, several congregants – visitors or church members alike – jump from the pew to bring the bread and wine forward. Newcomers lean into the ritual to learn what to do. Each week, this ritual is repeated but with a spontaneity that revives the spirit afresh.

Anyone is invited to partake in the Lord's Supper, and similarly anyone is invited to serve the Lord's Supper. Our congregation is very diverse, making our celebration of the Eucharist a reflection of Christ's open table. Jesus sat down with tax collector and prostitute alike, and at St. Paul's it is not uncommon to see a homeless man with a criminal past serving communion to a lawyer, and vice versa. In communion, we are called both to serve and be served. Communion is an equalizer. We are all the hungry (those seeking nourishment, both physically and spiritually) and we are the servers – those who extend God's welcome around the table. As Nadia Bolz-Weber writes in her book *Accidental Saints*, "Christ comes to us in the needs of the poor and hungry, needs that are met by another so that the gleaming redemption of God might be known."⁴ I cherish that the United Church of Christ has dismantled the hierarchy surrounding communion. Just as Christ turned the tables by serving the marginalized and maligned in his community, we are called through participation in Christ's table to dismantle power relationships and share equally in the gifts God extends. So often we proclaim God's

⁴ Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Accidental Saints: Finding God in all the Wrong People* (Colorado Springs: Convergent Books, 2015), 48.

grace for ourselves or our friends but choose to leave out those we consider “other”. As a visible reminder that God’s grace is extended to all, the sacraments challenge us to see the kin-dom of God as ever widening.

Right now as I write this paper, the Church universal is living in an unprecedented time of a global pandemic. A majority of churches have chosen to quarantine for the health and safety of their congregants. While lockdown significantly reshapes what ministry looks like in the modern era (and I anticipate I will spend much of my ministry adapting to these changes), an unfortunate side effect of this time is its impact on the sacraments. Communion and baptism are practiced in real-time; since much of their meaning derives from the community that is present to witness and participate in the ritual, it is very difficult to practice either in a time of social distancing.

Before my daughter was born in February of this year, my husband and I decided to baptize her on May 31. May 31 is the Day of Pentecost, the “birthday” of the Church – the day when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples. In baptism, we are welcomed into the universal church, the body of Christ; just as the disciples claimed their heritage in the community of God, we claim ours. In the United Church of Christ, baptism is not tied to salvation; our identities are already sealed as beloved children of God. As Rachel Held Evans wrote, "Jesus did not begin to be loved at the moment of his baptism, nor did he cease to be loved when his baptism became a memory. Baptism simply named the reality of his existing and unending belovedness."⁵

⁵ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*. (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2015), 14-15.

But the date of our daughter's baptism came and went as most of the country was in a state of mandated lockdown. Like the majority of events postponed during this time, my daughter will be baptized at a yet undetermined date; yet I still felt a sense of loss. The sense of loss was not tied to a sense of loss of grace; God already conferred this grace in the form of Jesus Christ. In baptism we claim this grace; we acknowledge our acceptance of it and of ourselves as beloved children of God.

The loss I felt was attached to the loss of community. Like the sacrament of communion, baptism can only be practiced in community. Even if the community is small enough to include only the parents and minister, this community is an essential part of the baptismal covenant. The community affirms and celebrates the baptized as a new member in the church universal. The UCC Book of Worship baptismal liturgy includes this congregational response:

Pastor: Do you, who witness and celebrate this sacrament, promise your love, support, and care to the one about to be baptized, as they live and grow in Christ?

People: We promise our love, support, and care.⁶

Baptism is the place where we covenant with God and with one another to pray together, to offer our gifts and talents, to come together in the service of God. Baptism propels us into community, safeguards our identity as God's beloved amongst a community of disciples endeavoring to grow in life and faith together.

At the beginning of COVID-19's impact, the pastoral leadership and church council at St. Paul's met to decide how to continue offering our worship services. Since communion is a part of our weekly service, we had to decide if and how we would celebrate the Lord's Supper. The decision was made to continue to celebrate communion. This decision was powerful, as it both

⁶ Book of Worship United Church of Christ (2012). Page 139.

speaks to the community's reliance on this ritual to unite us, as well as our faith in the continued power of this sacrament even during a time of social distancing. We have been able to utilize technology available to extend this sacrament in a virtual format. Prior to worship, congregants gather whatever elements from their own home for communion – sandwich bread, a hot dog bun, a cookie, as well as wine, water, or juice. In the ordinariness of our own homes, God is able to speak into the mundane –to transform what is commonplace into God's act of still-speaking. During a time of social isolation in which we are all spending more time in our own homes, there is no more powerful of a symbol and reminder. God is still acting.

For our communion liturgy during lockdown, I chose a resource published by the United Church of Christ. Each week, the pastor says:

We are one bread, one body, one cup of blessing. Though we are many throughout the earth and this church community is scattered, we are one in Christ. In your many kitchens, and living rooms, rest your hands lightly upon these elements which we set aside today to be a sacrament. Let us ask God's blessing upon them.

Gentle Redeemer, there is no lockdown on your blessing and no quarantine on grace. Send your Spirit of life and love, power and blessing upon every table where your child shelters in place, that this Bread may be broken and gathered in love and this Cup poured out to give hope to all. Risen Christ, live in us, that we may live in you. Breathe in us, that we may breathe in you.⁷

I chose to use this liturgy because it recognizes where we are as a people, a church, and a nation, and recognizes the holy within our own spaces. It reminds us as well that God's transformative grace is transcendent. It does not rely on an altar, a building, or even social proximity to be

⁷ Maren C. Tirabassi, "Online Communion for Palm Sunday," *United Church of Christ Worship Ways*, April 5, 2020, https://www.ucc.org/worship_worship-ways

found. Just as Moses found Holy Ground on a mountain and the chaplain found Holy Ground in a hospital room, our community finds Holy Ground within our own spaces.

As a global pandemic and quarantine bring to the surface important existential questions about our social institutions as well as our churches, I am reminded of the early Israelites after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem – where is God, if where we previously found God is not there? I am interested in the way communities and individuals have grappled with this question. At a time when there is no simple solution but we are desperate for some stability or security, what do we rely on to answer our questions and provide meaning?

At the beginning of quarantine, the church council at St. Paul's displayed an abiding example of the United Church of Christ's approach to grappling with conflict and uncertainty. Just before our state mandated closures of groups of 10 or more meeting indoors, our council met to analyze the numbers and decide if and when we should close the church. At the time I found myself desperate for some sort of strong leadership that would result in strong decisions – yes, we are closing, or no, we are not. I became envious of the hierarchy within my husband's denomination that gives ultimate decision-making authority to the bishop and would take the pressure and blame off of local congregations. In a scary time of instability, I craved the easy answer.

The decision to temporarily cease activities at the church was not as simple as how or if we offer virtual worship. St. Paul's is very outward-focused and ministry at the church is mostly comprised of direct service with the homeless and our low-income neighbors. As one council member said, "how can we be the hands of Jesus when we're not supposed to touch?" We struggled with how to live into our mission of breaking down barriers that exist in society when we have to maintain social barriers.

Confused and without knowing what I thought we should do, I sat down (virtually) with the church council at St Paul's to engage in our process of decision-making. The many hours of conversation helped me reflect upon and process my own emotions. There was not agreement, but the council entered the discussion respectfully and intentionally – acknowledging the strong nature of what was at stake, the ambiguity involved, and implications on both the individual and community levels.

This process of meeting around the table exemplified for me what the UCC is great at and why I love the congregational polity. There are no easy answers in this being human, no one-size-fits-all. But through meeting around the table, as equal partners and investors in a larger mission, we find our common purpose – and are possibly changed in the process. We are best served when those at the table include diverse voices and those we disagree with.

At times of ambiguity– like the decision of when and how to temporarily stop in-person church gatherings– we may desire a strong decision-making authority that will tell us which way to go, but we are best served by asking and dealing with the questions together in community. This is the harder path, but the path to which we are called to grow. Through this process I have seen how church, like faith, is a verb – it is a living and breathing story being written together. When a church cares more about a building than the people within it, or honors tradition more than continued revelation, we fail to see how God is still speaking.

A year ago, I attended the 2019 UCC General Synod in Milwaukee as a delegate for UCC Disability Ministries. It was a meaningful experience to see our polity in action, as well as the diverse communities and varied stories that make up our denomination. A walk through the exhibit hall was a display of who we are as a church – the many voices, at times competing, but united in our desire to live more fully into the kin-dom of God. Congregations within the UCC

are as varied as the stories and voices that sit in the pews. Just as individuals in the pews may not support all the work of the local church, so too the local church can be independent in matters of doctrine and might not support the national body's stances on theological or moral issues. Nevertheless, we are all in a covenant relationship. Each expression of the church, from the individual congregant to the national body, recognizes the honor and inherent dignity of all other expressions. We may not always agree, but we are called to listen, to hear, and to respect other voices.

I saw an example of our polity in action during the General Synod in 2019. An unexpected controversy arose around the presence of a particular exhibitor in the exhibit hall. The exhibitor, Faithful and Welcoming Churches, represents a faction of UCC churches that are ECOT – Evangelical, Conservative, Orthodox, or Traditional. The stated purpose of Faithful and Welcoming is, “to promote Christ-centered unity, which we understand to be the founding vision of the United Church of Christ. In that spirit, we encourage churches, pastors, and laity who consider themselves ECOT to remain in active covenant in the United Church of Christ.”⁸ As ECOT, Faithful and Welcoming churches advocate for traditional, heterosexual marriages. Yet many attending the 2019 General Synod voiced hurt by traditional churches that seek to silence the expressions of the LGBTQ+ community. A conflict arose between these two sides representing different voices within the UCC.

Historically the United Church of Christ is a socially progressive denomination – we were the first denomination to ordain an African American pastor (in 1785!), the first to form an integrated anti-slavery society (1846), the first to ordain a woman (1853), and the first to ordain

⁸ “About Faithful and Welcoming,” Faithful and Welcoming Churches, accessed July 16, 2020, <http://www.faithfulandwelcoming.org/about/>

an openly gay minister (1972); within every social movement, the United Church of Christ has been on the frontlines advocating for social change, and at times, systemic change within our social institutions.⁹ While the UCC's progressive stance on political matters is what has attracted many to our churches (including me), the reality of covenantal accountability means we sit in relationship even with voices that may disagree. We are independent in matters of doctrine and belief, but united in our efforts to walk together in pursuit of God's mission and will.

In the debate that emerged on the convention floor around the presence of Faithful and Welcoming, I saw true expressions of what it means to be a covenantal church. While I felt that ECOT should retain their exhibit space, I grew more aware of what was at stake for each side through their heart-felt arguments. Much like the discussions within St. Paul's council, I felt changed in the process. The UCC is made up of diverse, at times competing voices. As a church we are called not to simply accommodate those who disagree with us, but to be in relationship with them.

Ultimately, there was no conclusion to the debate around Faithful and Welcoming's presence on the exhibit floor; the discussion was referred to the United Church of Christ Board of Directors, which handles the business of the entire church in between synods. At the time I felt frustrated that the general body did not get an opportunity to vote on the motion, though I recognize now that a vote taken prematurely could do more harm by silencing the voices that already felt marginalized by the motion in discussion. Due to the time constraints of a national gathering there was not room for a full discussion on the floor of general synod, I understand the need to refer the decision to the Board of Directors so that more time could be given to research

⁹ "UCC Firsts," United Church of Christ, accessed August 2, 2020, https://www.ucc.org/about-us_ucc-firsts

and weigh opinions on the matter. Our efforts to “be” and “do” the church is not always a pretty process; at times we find God by sitting in the anxiety and dis-ease for a little while. Opting for the mystery of a decision-not-yet-made is a brave choice, much like living into the mystery of a triune God that is both one and three. This is the harder path, but the path where we grow and learn. As Walter Brueggemann notes, “Covenanting requires maturity.”¹⁰

Recently, in a conversation with my Spiritual Director I learned more about the historical context of the word “covenant” in the Bible, which sheds new insight into what it means to be in a covenantal relationship. The earliest references to forming a covenant between two parties in the book of Genesis imply a physical dimension:

And when the time drew near that Israel must die, he called his son Joseph and said to him, “If now I have found favor in your sight, put your hand under my thigh and promise to deal kindly and truly with me. Do not bury me in Egypt.”¹¹

To seal a covenant, the person signing the covenant would put his hand underneath the thigh of the party offering the covenant (often a male) – in this way offering his assent by touching the most vulnerable part of a man’s anatomy. Covenant involves vulnerability, revealing of oneself predicated on the respect and trust of another person. In this way it is more a marriage than a legal treaty or contract -- it is commitment to a lived relationship.

As members of a church (both a local church and the church universal), our covenant with each other is mirrored after God’s own covenant with humanity. God’s covenant with humanity is marked by God revealing God’s self – in the form of a rainbow with Noah, or as an

¹⁰Walter Brueggemann, *The Covenanted Self: Explorations in Law and Covenant* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 11

¹¹ Genesis 47:29, (NIV).

enflamed bush on Mount Sinai, and most significantly – the utter giving or emptying of Godself (kenosis) in the form of Immanuel, or Jesus Christ. As UCC scholar Walter Brueggemann spoke in his 1979 address to General Synod,

What emerges [from God’s covenant-making behavior] is a theological revolution. This God is not marked by power but by faithfulness and vulnerability. This God resolves to be with and stay with and depend upon the resources, judgements, and capacities of God’s new covenant partner. Covenant means to locate the power for life, not in self, but in the commitment, giving, and caring of others.¹²

The power of covenant is inextricable from the power of community. We are vulnerable to the point of finding ourselves in others. This is both a liberation and an obligation: if my humanity is bound up with others, then I am not free until all are free. Liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez writes, “The freedom to which we are called presupposes going out of oneself, the breaking down of our selfishness... the foundation of this freedom is openness to others. The fullness of liberation – a free gift from Christ – is communion with God and with other human beings.” Liberation is found in the transformative power of community.

The scripture that most drives my call to ministry is Luke 24:36-49 (the same story is also found in John 20:19-31):

While [the disciples] were talking, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.¹³

¹² Jane Fidler Hoffman, *Covenant: A Study for the United Church of Christ* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 2008), 27.

¹³ Luke 24:36-40 (NRSV).

The revolutionary act of the incarnation – God, in first-century Palestine, choosing to live in and amongst the most marginalized – is repeated after Christ’s crucifixion. God eschews the angelic, divinic form of the transfiguration, but after the crucifixion Christ reappears in a human form with wounds and scars. Christ does not try and cover up his injuries, to clean himself up or somehow make his appearance more palatable to the disciples, who are still shaking from witnessing his brutal execution – no, his injuries are how he is known to the disciples. Christ’s wounds are now woven in his identity; he is both fully divine, and fully human. His injuries are a part of him, as they are for all of us. They are neither a divine punishment nor an opportunity for fixing; Christ is the Wounded Healer. By becoming wounded himself God accepts us fully in our own woundedness – showing that this vulnerability is a source of strength. As Henri Nouwen wrote in his book that coined the term Wounded Healer, “When we become aware that we do not have to escape our pains, but that we can mobilize them into a common search for life, those very pains are transformed from expressions of despair into signs of hope.”¹⁴

The concept of Christ as Wounded Healer has profoundly shaped my faith, my vocation, as well as my call to leadership. I was hurt, as so many have been, by the white-washed, sanitized version of an able-bodied Christ that has historically been emphasized in traditional Protestantism. The combination of liturgy and pastoral emphasis often leaves the impression of needing to dress up, not just for church, but for God. Churches leave the impression that God cares only to see our very best, which has too often been defined as white, middle-class, heterosexual, and able-bodied. As a person with a disability, then, I felt particularly alienated from God; if God cares only to deal with the able-bodied, what would God want with me?

¹⁴ Henri Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer* (New York City: Random-House, Inc, 1979), 93.

I have found healing in Christ. Just as Christ reappeared amongst the disciples, huddled together in fear, bearing his own wounds and scars, God continually finds us where we are – often through those scars we seek to hide from God. While a CPE resident, I discovered an interest in trauma-informed therapies. Starting from the premise that as humans we have all been wounded, trauma-based therapies begin from the place of our wounds. Rather than running away in our attempt to create a social self, our wounds can often be the place of our best learning. As churches, we are just beginning our understanding of trauma-based ministry. But like the disciples, by seeing the wounds, and touching the scars, we can come to recognize Christ in our midst.

At a time of social distancing with an unknown end, we find additional hope in Luke 24:36-49. Christ steps through the physical boundaries of a locked room to meet the disciples in their isolation, who are themselves sheltering in place. At a time when the church is unlearning and relearning what it means to be the church, it is indeed a strange time to begin my ministry. But ministry is a vocation at its best when it is constantly evolving. God meets us in this mystery and reveals Godself in the gaps and spaces we have left open. God does not live outside the mess, the resentments, and the pettiness that often accompany our daily life; God lives in these moments. God is a God that we do not need to “dress up” to see; God lives in the mess, knows the poverty in Belfast, Northern Ireland where I served from 2012-2014 as well as the racial divide in Cleveland, Ohio where I minister now. And through this all God does not leave us here but encounters us here; God finds us and loves our whole, often messy, selves and does not run away. For me, this means that the work of the church is never finished. Just as God is still-speaking, so too ministry is always evolving. Within my practice of ministry, I pledge to

continually seek out God's voice, to hear diverse voices in the community and in the cloud of witnesses, and to genuinely reflect God's love.