

Maine Conference  
United Church of Christ  
Sunrise Association

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Authorization Paper

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**7/22/2018**

...that they may all be one. (John 17:21)

## Part One – Call

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kr01B0n-KHk>

Emmylou Harris – “I Hear A Call”

*I hear a call    Now will I answer    Forsake my all    To serve another  
Though darkness falls    Stay a believer    I hear a call    Now will I answer*

Parker Palmer’s definition of Call resonates with me: “Vocation at its deepest level is, ‘This is something I can’t not do, for reasons I’m unable to explain to anyone else and don’t fully understand myself but that are nonetheless compelling.’”<sup>1</sup>

Call and vocation are similar in my understanding, but not identical. I believe call is a step deeper, closer to one’s heart, than is vocation. To me, call denotes a spiritual component, whereas vocation has a more secular definition. I think one can be unaware they are following their call and yet live into it fully. I also think one can believe they are fulfilling a call but are not following the will of Spirit, but their own will. Thus, it is critical to continue reflecting on call and vocation throughout life.

I believe I was called by God while driving to work over the course of a three week period in May of 2010. It began with me talking, asking questions, ranting and raving. I never expected God to answer, but answers came at me; enveloped me in a cloud of compassionate love that simply held me. And then God waited. Almost like a game of Hide and Seek, with God indicating whether my thoughts were “warmer” or “colder,” whether I was honing in on or straying away from where God was nudging (pushing) me to go. God’s presence held me as I talked, listened, argued, denied, refused, and finally accepted this new course for my life.

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<sup>1</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 25.

My pastor and congregation were quick to embrace my new path. Some claimed to have seen it coming, but many were as surprised as I was. I led a worship service and delivered a reflection soon after my epiphany. What I remember about that morning is not what I said, but how I was received: as one with authority. The Holy Spirit was surely present among us.

Part of my awakening to my calling was a voice within me (God's voice) saying, "Do what you love." That voice gave me the courage to take the next step, to begin my path toward ministry, to step out (way out) of my comfort zone and enroll at Bangor Theological Seminary. If everyone in the whole world were able to "do what they love" I believe our world would be in harmony with itself.

*"Don't ask yourself what the world needs; ask yourself what makes you come alive. And then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."*

-Howard Thurman

The coursework to complete my educational requirements for ordination has proven to be invaluable. Each new course provided insights and experiences that built on the previous and prepared me for what was to come next. Ongoing discernment continued as the years passed. Consistent with my nature, or perhaps a testimony to the rightness of this path, whatever I was immersed in was my new favorite thing. All coursework left me wanting more; more experiences, more knowledge, and more time to study and grow and nurture myself and others.

I have spent the past eight years discerning what it is that I love about ministry; what makes me come alive. What are my gifts? Listening. Encouraging people to be their true selves. Offering hope. Which parts call to me on a deeper level? How shall I spend my time? How can I best be of service and remain true to myself?

The resounding answer: Youth. I am filled with an incredible joy when I am around young people. It is a privilege to spend time with them, whether sharing a Children's Message or exploring a Godly Play lesson or listening to music that interests them or playing their favorite games, or spending time in nature together. Time spent with children and teens is rich with authenticity and love. As is time spent with all age groups, all levels of spiritual or religious questioning or certainty, all manner of physical or mental illness or personal challenges. I am filled with joy when authentically engaging with any and all of God's people.

I believe it is important to bring passion to whatever it is one does. Since embarking on my long and winding road to ministry, I find I bring renewed passion to everything I do. Managing a hardware store, volunteering at the Restorative Justice Project of the Midcoast, being a Chaplain Intern at Eastern Maine Medical Center; all are imbued with reverence, love, and grace.

As an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ I will speak the truth of the text as I understand it; speak truth to power, speak truth in love, all with the goal of redemption and reconciliation for individuals and society as a whole.<sup>2</sup> Yes, that is my conviction and call. One example: My Preaching II course was an Independent Study that incorporated the May 2015 Festival of Homiletics in Denver, Colorado. One of the workshops I attended, led by Grace Imathiu, was focused on the importance of preaching the difficult texts. When I returned home, the Lectionary text on my assigned Sunday was 2 Samuel – David commits adultery with Bathsheba. I had spent 12 months in 2014-15 as a Restorative Justice<sup>3</sup> volunteer and was led to

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<sup>2</sup> Jill Duffield, Presbyterian Outlook, Editor and Publisher, 2018 Festival of Homiletics.

<sup>3</sup> The Restorative Justice Project promotes fundamental change in the justice system and schools. Responses to crime and wrongdoing seek renewal and safety for the community, support and healing for victims and accountability and reintegration of the offender.

explore this text through the lens of a Restorative Justice Circle. I believe it was a powerful way for both myself and the congregation to encounter the text and wrestle with the many facets of it.

*“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’”  
as the prophet Isaiah said. (John 1:23)*

Like all, or most, of the prophets in the Bible, I have been reluctant to hear God, to follow God, to trust God. But hear, follow, and trust I must. This is not the path of least resistance. This is not the path my spouse and I envisioned 26 years ago when we committed our lives to one another. But now, this is the only path that feels right. We have dealt with the upheaval of integrating graduate school into a schedule already filled with full-time work and family commitments. We have adapted to alternative methods of completing course requirements as necessitated by the closing of Bangor Theological Seminary. We are proceeding with faith and hope that God will continue to show us the way forward. We are living into the reality of this new life full of promise.

## **Part Two – Faith**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0QAIUPwfj6o>

**Eva Cassidy – “How Can I Keep from Singing?”**

*No storm can shake my inmost calm    While to that refuge clinging  
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth    How can I keep from singing?*

It has been a challenging couple of years for me and my family. The death of my beloved nephew Spencer at the tender age of 21 shattered our idyllic universe in ways previously unimagined. Our love for one another is strong and we came together in support of my sister and her other two sons. Like many families, mine has a mixture of faith beliefs which are difficult to categorize. We have Roman Catholic parents. My siblings and their spouses and their offspring

are atheist, evangelical, spiritual but not religious, lapsed but not unbelieving, searching, and agnostic. The one commonality we could all agree on during and after this tragedy was that love is what saw us through. We did not have to agree on the definition of love, only that we felt and understood it to be at the heart of our grieving and of our healing.

I define God as Love. How can a God of Love allow tragedies to happen? God does not promise to stop tragedy from occurring. God promises to be present. God was then, and is now, present in all things, seen and unseen.

How has this tragedy shaped me for ministry? Having experienced this loss, I am equipped to be a more compassionate minister when tragedy occurs in the lives of others. I was broken open and forced to reevaluate everything I thought I knew about life; about God; about me. One of the first truths that I realized is that I would never be the same person that I was before; that my family would never be the same as it was before. There would always be a Spencer-shaped hole in our lives. Like Jesus' followers, we mark time in two categories; before Spencer's death and after Spencer's death. We cherish the memories of a precocious child, a gifted athlete and physicist, a kind-hearted prankster. Do I have any doubt that Jesus made post resurrection appearances? I have experiences of my own and of trusted friends and family members that authenticate life beyond death. If it were true for Jesus and his disciples and family, of course it can be true for us! We marvel at (and cherish) Spencer's post-death communications from beyond this dimension. Some of us can't help but smile at the irony of the avowed atheist remaining in contact with his closest family and friends.

I believe in God, not as an act of faith, but as a result of experience. Prior to experiencing God in life altering ways, I had only believed in the possibility of God. I can state with certainty, God **is**. Knowing that God exists does not mean that I can define or fully understand

what/who/where/when/how/why God is. God is many things, not the least of which is a sacred mystery.

Is it blasphemy to assert that what was/is true for Jesus is true for you and me; true for all of humanity? As each Sunday worship service can be thought of as Little Easters, I believe each of us is born to live as Little Christs<sup>4</sup>. Although I do not think this is blasphemy, it is sometimes difficult to break out of my earlier beliefs that felt more limiting. At the 2018 Festival of Homiletics in Washington, D.C., I heard Richard Rohr make a presentation entitled, “By What Authority?” He explained that he prefers the triangle of Scripture, Tradition, and Experience to the Wesleyan quadrilateral (that includes Reason) because he believes it is our nature to allow Reason to overshadow the other three categories. Reason can get in the way of faith. Reason can limit the interpretation of one’s experience. Reason can limit how we understand our Scriptures. Reason limits our understanding of a limitless God.

Rohr stressed the importance of trusting one’s own Experience when wrestling with Scripture and Tradition. Our experiences are different than the experiences of our forebears and must inform our theologies. Our theologies must evolve with our experience. Jesus trusted Experience over Tradition. Paul trusted Experience over Tradition. Ruth and Naomi trusted Experience over Tradition. To be true to ourselves and our faith, we too must trust our own Experience over Tradition. Rohr suggests that if something is true, it is true all the time; that if something is true anywhere, it is true everywhere. I heard my truths, my experiences echoed in Richard’s words. His words affirmed my experiences.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/161004>, accessed July 5, 2018)

If it was true for Jesus, it can be true for each and every one of us. Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit on his disciples and empowered them to go forth and preach and heal in the name of God. We are equally empowered in this day, more than 2000 years later. Perhaps we are all meant to live as fully human and fully divine; to live as C.S. Lewis wrote, as little Christs<sup>5</sup> in the world. Can what is true for one, be true for all? I try always to remain open to the mystery of faith.

I live at the intersection of faith and doubt. Do I have faith in God? I have absolute certainty that God exists. My doubt comes in the form of trying to define God; trying to understand the Trinity, struggling at times to believe all that we proclaim in our Statement of Faith. My faith in God is strong. My faith in human-made definitions of God, and constructs for God, leave me plenty of room for doubt.

Consider these words of Abraham Lincoln:

“I have never united myself to any church, because I have found difficulty in giving my assent, without mental reservation, to the long, complicated statements of Christian doctrine which characterize their Articles of Belief and Confessions of Faith. When any church will inscribe over its altar, as its sole qualification for membership, the Savior’s condensed statement of the substance of both Law and Gospel, ‘*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself,*’ that church will I join with all my heart and all my soul.”<sup>6</sup>

If churches required belief only in this very important proclamation (Deut. 6:5, Luke 10:27) would we have more people living in the community of Jesus Christ? And more people living in the even wider community of God the creator of all things seen and unseen?

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/161004>, accessed July 5, 2018)

<sup>6</sup> F.B. Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House with Abraham Lincoln: The Story of a Picture* (Digital Scanning Inc., Dec. 1, 2000)



The necessity of a statement of faith seems evident. However, I agree with those who also assert that statements of faith must be changed over time to better reflect the growth of the people. “For instance, Friedrich D.E. Schleiermacher (d. 1834) challenged the traditional idea that creeds and confessions are objective statements of ‘the truth about God.’ He argued that they are expressions of ‘religious consciousness,’ which are subject to historical circumstance and change. The church does not receive the doctrines of the Christian religion from heaven on tablets of stone. Doctrines develop in a cultural context as the Christian community seeks to teach and to explain what it believes to be true.”<sup>7</sup> God is still speaking ...

### **Part Three – Theology**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CadP4dRemYk>

#### **Holly Near – “It Could Have Been Me”**

*It could have been me    But instead it was you  
So I'll keep doing the work you were doing    As if I were two*

My Roman Catholic education, although I consciously rejected it in my teen years, still informs who I am today. That upbringing, rooted in the philosophies of St. Augustine and the early church fathers, has shaped my life long after I quit attending Mass and Catechism classes. From this background I hold my core beliefs of Christianity: (1) There is one, omniscient God, (2) God created all things, seen and unseen, and (3) Father, Son, and Holy Ghost form the Trinity.

These truths of my formative years are my default beliefs. As an “unconnected” adult (age 18-33), as a Moravian (age 34-40) and now a 15 year member of the UCC, these three

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<sup>7</sup> Zikmund, Barbara Brown and Reinhard Ulrich, eds. *The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ. Vol. 1 Ancient and Medieval Legacies.* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1995), 2.

statements are still my starting point. I work my way forward, using new language, as my original beliefs fit into reconstructed theological paradigms.

These three core beliefs are generally accepted whether a Roman Catholic, Moravian, or United Church of Christ member. It is in the finer interpretation and the language used to express those beliefs that difference occurs. I am moving away from the notion of the infallibility of the Pope, through the 95 Theses of Martin Luther, and into the Reformed Christianity of John Calvin. Finally, I have warmed to the ideas of progressive theologians such as Marcus Borg and Richard Rohr.

## **Worship**

The time spent reading, writing, and participating in the Bangor Theological Seminary class, *Spirituality and Theology: God, Nature, and Humanity*, taught by Dr. Steven Lewis and Belden Lane in 2013, emphasized for me the importance of language as it is used to shape our experiences. When we can name our experiences we can better understand them. The paradox is that many experiences of God cannot be labeled with language and must be given over to the mystery. God experiences – divine union moments – are communication without words – communion – between mortals and their Creator.

Why is worship as a community important? I believe we need to be deeply connected to one another as well as to God; to be present to one another as well as to God. Envisioning a triangle of God, Self, and Other, kept in balance, can be a healthy reminder to pray and live so that we may all be one. At the heart of my worship life is the belief that our Creator God, vast and expansive, mysterious and magnificent, is alive in me. Additionally, I am, and all of Creation

is, alive in God. To be in right relationship with God is to be in right relationship with all of Creation. All good things come from God. All of Creation is praiseworthy.

John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and Belden Lane all speak of Creation mirroring God. That description encompasses the depths of the seas, the creatures that I know and love on this planet Earth, along with other planets and stars and galaxies of the Universe. This image of God is more than I can imagine, and quite possibly more than I could bear.

Quiet times in the morning and in the evening help me maintain my balance. God's Spirit still comes to me on my early morning commutes to work as I pray for myself and others, often inspired by the miracles of creation that I am privileged to witness each day. Meditation encourages me to quiet my mind and listen for where God is leading me. I seek to live my life with God all day every day. Additionally, participating in a weekly worship service, whether leading or attending, is crucial for remaining grounded in a community life of Christ.

I consider my ministry a partnership with God. I make room for the Holy Spirit to guide my direction. I look to the Scriptures for wisdom and Jesus for strength of character. There is no way that I could or would walk this path without the strong sense that it is not me but God propelling me forward. When leading a worship service it is not I, but We. I call on the Holy Spirit when planning the service; when writing the Invocation and the Prayers of the People, choosing the Responsive Reading, crafting the Message based on Scripture. It is not I, but We during the collaboration with the Music Director and Scripture readers. It is We, not I, during the Service, holding space for the Spirit of God and the Spirit of the people, past and present.

## **Scripture**

Our Scriptures are God-inspired books that provide connections to our past that ground us in the present day and time. Our Scriptures are alive; the words may remain the same but the meanings are interpreted and reinterpreted with each passing generation. Times change, Scriptures remain the same. Relevance and wisdom must be prayerfully discerned.

Our First and Second Testament Scriptures, reveal a mysterious God; a wrathful God; a God full of surprises; a God of Love. These Old and New Testament Scriptures give us context and direction. Of course, our understanding of God may be different than that of Moses or Job, or Miriam or Sarah, or Peter or Paul, or Martha or Mary. What was once believed to be the wrath of God is now understood as scientific phenomena. Though we now know much more about our universe than our ancestors, there is definitely still mystery, much we do not know about God if we are humble enough to admit it.

I believe with all of my being that Jesus lived and walked this earth as is written in the Scriptures. I hold reverently the birth narratives and genealogies in the said same Scriptures. There is literal truth and then there are sacred stories that help explain the unexplainable; the mysteries. Did Jesus ascend to heaven? Yes, I believe so. Will you and I ascend to heaven? Yes, I believe that too. I believe that resurrection happened, for Christ and also for Christ's followers. I can remain open to mystery and possibility, as I believe that our understanding of God is in no way comprehensive. There is so much that we do not know. Surrendering to the mystery of all that is God is a crucial element in my understanding of faith.

## **Atonement Theology**

In my Systematic Theology II class at Andover Newton Theological School, taught by theologian and scholar Benjamin Valentin, I was introduced to four traditional atonement motifs. Each succeeding motif accepts and rejects parts and pieces of the previous one(s) and argues for an alternative viewpoint. I envision these motifs as building blocks. First century Jewish Christians framed Jesus' death with sacrificial language because that was their lens for viewing the world. The Christus Victor motif was the next major block laid in the foundation. During the 2<sup>nd</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> centuries (Patristic Era) Gustav Aulen is credited with reinterpreting Jesus' death on the cross as a victory gained over the evil powers of Satan. Next, the Satisfaction motif, posited by Anselm of Canterbury in the 11<sup>th</sup> century seeks to make corrections and refocus the argument for atonement based on the cultural lens of the feudal lordship system. Finally, Peter Abelard's Exemplary Love motif, informed by the courtly love lens of the time, rounds out the traditional grouping.

The definition of atonement that resonates with me is from 21<sup>st</sup> century theologian Sharon Baker. She writes, "By asking God to forgive us, he revealed the heart of God. He showed us that the way to God is not a war-path, but the way of peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Jesus exposed and interrupted the cycle of violence that we never seem able to escape on our own. Through Jesus, God entered into our world, suffered the consequences of our attachment to violence and reversed the retributive cycle of violence into a cycle of forgiveness, reconciliation, restoration, and peace."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Sharon Baker, *Executing God: Rethinking Everything You've Been Taught about Salvation and the Cross* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 155-156.

Each of these atonement motifs mirrors the cultural and/or judicial systems of the times. Each successive motif modified the previous motifs and re-framed them to fit their world view. Initially I found all four of the traditional motifs of atonement (Sacrifice, Victory, Satisfaction, and Exemplary Love) troubling. I then realized that my emerging theology mirrors that of Abelard's Exemplary Love motif, which I am updating and re-framing through my own cultural and judicial perspective, moving from a retributive justice model to a restorative justice model.

Jesus was the perfect child of God. He, being both fully human and fully divine, was able to transcend human shortcomings and fulfill the destiny set before him. In his infinite love he beckons all to follow him. He has shown us the way to perfect unity; with our Creator God and with all of creation. What I think of as Baker's "Restorative Justice" theory of atonement makes sense to me. I believe that Jesus was an exemplar for the trending concept of Restorative Justice: loving God, loving neighbor, and advocating for human rights for all, in order to bring humanity to at-one-ment with God and neighbor. A Restorative Justice motif mirrors the segment of our society that strives to make individuals and communities whole (bring together rather than to separate), as Jesus' death and resurrection can be understood to make individuals and communities whole.

Jesus was sent, and Jesus sends us, as he sent the disciples, and they sent the apostles. Jesus was sent to build a community of believers, not in him, but in God. Jesus was to call all people to follow him (to God). Ripples both large and small have been felt around the world since the life and death of Jesus. He did not call one faith over another, or call one race over another. Jesus simply invited everyone into a dialogue, challenging existing beliefs and norms, pointing toward a more universal way, so that we may all be one.

## **The Trinity**

*“And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” (John 14:16-17)*

There was no Trinitarian theology when the Gospels were written, yet when I read this passage from John’s gospel it prefigures the three in one person Godhead.

I believe in the person of Christ, as an individual and as a member of the Trinity. I also believe that each of us are in relationship with our Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer and thus are also of the Trinity. We are meant to be as Jesus was/is. God is in each and every one of us at birth, as God is in all of Creation. We are human and we have the Divine within us. Jesus was able to cultivate the Divine within. I believe we are to strive for the same.

How does one go about explaining the Trinity to a congregant or seeker? Father, Son, Holy Ghost. Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. Choosing language is important, but more than that, how are three, One? And how is One, three? One of the analogies I like best is to compare the Trinity to the three forms of water; liquid, solid, and vapor. The Trinity: three unique forms, but one substance.

## **The Cross and Resurrection**

I struggle with Cross Theology. I am disturbed by the violence inherent in the image of the Cross. The cross was an instrument of torture and death, not just for Jesus, but for others who dared to challenge the government. Jesus’ death was disturbing. So were the deaths of those crucified on his right and left; those crucified anonymously in the years before and after Jesus. Making myself look at the cross is a way to remember, a way to hold dear and sacred all lives; a way to honor all those killed unjustly, and say “never again”.

Rather than an instrument of death, early Christians flipped the function of the cross and turned it into a life affirming symbol. One man died, but he could not be held by the bonds of death, and he was raised up. The cross is a reminder that Jesus rose up, that death is not final. The cross is a reminder that our mortal death does not prevail over our eternal life. The cross is a reminder that if it was true for Jesus, it can be true for each one of us. The cross symbolizes not death, but new life after death. The cross symbolizes an all-encompassing love that is the heart of God.

### **Sin and Repentance**

I struggle with the concept of original sin. I have embraced the phrase “pure but imperfect”, which I heard Rabbi Amita Jarmon (Adas Yeshurun Synagogue in Rockland, Maine) preach while speaking about Jewish Atonement theology at my UCC church in Lincolnville Center in the Fall of 2012. We are born pure but imperfect; born pure but doomed to fail/fall. This seems related to the Augustinian belief that humans have only one choice, which is to do wrong. We are doomed to fail/fall, but we then have the opportunity to get right with God, again, if we choose.

As Gilda Radner’s Saturday Night Live character, Roseanne Rosannadanna used to say, “It’s always something.” There are myriad ways to sin; to turn away from, or be separated from God. But as many ways as there are to turn away, there are ways to return. As with all of life, so much of our perception stems from our attitudes – either positive or negative. Jesus was sent to save; not to condemn (John 3:17). Repentance is to turn away from sin; to turn toward God. We can come full circle. Or maybe it is more accurate to envision spiraling through life with God. We are with God, away from God, with God, away from God, with God ...



## **Forgiveness**

God is endlessly compassionate and forgives each one of us with an abundance of grace, for all of our sins, large and small. There is nothing that we can do to separate ourselves irredeemably from God. Hard to fathom; but true. We can seek forgiveness and be granted forgiveness. That is the model that Jesus set and that we are to follow. For ourselves. For others. Receive the Holy Spirit ... “If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (John 20:23) From my perspective, forgiveness is key. We are harmed when we don’t forgive. We are the ones that retain the sin; the anger; the hurt. Forgiveness is freeing and makes space in our hearts for love.

## **Eschatology and Judgment**

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven ... My understanding of eschatology is that we are to live as if we can make this a heaven on earth here and now, for all of creation. And yet, there is the additional promise; the additional hope; that beyond this life is more; more than we can imagine or dream.

Jesus’ message was one of radical love and inclusiveness. In Matthew 25 Jesus speaks to God’s judgment upon our lives, our actions or inactions. When asking when it was that we saw Jesus hungry or thirsty and gave him something to eat and drink, when it was that we saw Jesus a stranger and invited him in, when it was that we saw Jesus naked and clothed him, when it was that we saw Jesus sick or in prison and visited him? We all know the answer. The song lyrics echo in my head from my childhood growing up in the Catholic Church, “Whatsoever you do to the least of my brothers; that you do unto me.” While today we may sing it with more inclusive

language; the core message instilled deep within me is to treat all of God's people as beloved family; to treat all of God's people as reverently as I would treat God, so that we may all be one.

## **Grace**

“A prominent Old Testament (Hebrew) word describing God's grace is *chesed*. This word speaks of deliverance from enemies, affliction, or adversity. It also denotes enablement, daily guidance, forgiveness, and preservation. The New Testament (Greek) word is *Charis*. It focuses on the provision of salvation.”<sup>9</sup>

Generally grace is viewed as positive outcomes that we deserve no credit for. But what of the negative outcomes that we deserve no blame for? Is grace a double edged sword? If grace is God's favor what is God's dis-favor? NOT sin. What I have internalized is that grace is the unearned, undeserved attention of God, and that we experience grace in circumstances both desirable and undesirable. Grace is God's love given freely to all people, in all circumstances.

## **Sacraments of Baptism and Communion**

By the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Sacraments of Baptism and Communion were viewed as “outward signs of the invisible grace of God”<sup>10</sup> by most, if not all Christians. I also believe there is an agreement among Christians that the Sacraments contain elements of mystery. Gonzalez – when translating the Greek to Latin – writes that the word sacrament has dual meanings. The first is mystery. The second is oath.<sup>11</sup> Thus, our sacraments involve the ritual of having pastor and recipient speaking formulaic words (oaths) in order to be blessed by the grace (mystery) of God. The sacraments are an effort to remember and recognize and acknowledge the mystery of God working in our lives.

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<sup>9</sup> (<https://www.allaboutgod.com/definition-of-gods-grace-faq.htm>, accessed May 30, 2018)

<sup>10</sup> Alistair E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1994), 67.

<sup>11</sup> Justo L. Gonzalez, *A Concise History of Christian Doctrine*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 150.

The congregation is the body of Christ. Matthew's gospel states in chapter 18, verse 20, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." For me, Communion is another way to acknowledge, reaffirm, and give thanks for the triangle of God, Self, and Other. I approach Communion as a feast primarily of love. It is a reminder of the Love between God and humans. It is a reminder that I am a part of a greater whole; that I am one with God, with Jesus, with my fellow human beings. Communion brings me closer to the Unknown; closer to God, closer to my fellow humans, closer to Oneness; closer to fulfillment of the hope that we may all be one.

*Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." (John 6:35)*

We are called to fellowship and communion. Jesus invites us. Jesus meets us at the table. Jesus feeds us and quenches our thirst. By sharing in communion we enter into the circle of eternal life. "I/We believe in an open Communion where all people are invited to God's Table. It is in these elements of Communion that we remember the work of Christ and our common dependence on God. Communion celebrates the presence of God in our lives and reaffirms God's deep and eternal love for us."<sup>12</sup>

"Baptism is a symbol of regeneration, of new life, and of a liberating experience for human beings. It serves as a symbol of introduction and welcome to the community of faith, who promise in turn, to nurture those in the community."<sup>13</sup> I was baptized as an infant into the Roman Catholic Church. My parents and an aunt and uncle stood in front of family and community and promised to love and nurture me in the ways of God. As an adult I have promised the same for some of my nieces and nephews. I can personally attest to the presence of

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<sup>12</sup> Mack, *Cohort Statement of Faith*, Center for Progressive Renewal, UCC History & Polity, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> Mack, *Cohort Statement of Faith*, Center for Progressive Renewal.

Holy Mystery during the administering of sacraments. I am frequently, if not always, overcome by the Spirit and moved to tears while participating in or witnessing these life changing events.

#### **Part Four – United Church of Christ**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RrTfNTzAvYY>

Peter, Paul, and Mary – “The Wedding Song (There is Love)”

*He is now to be among you    At the calling of your hearts  
Rest assured this troubadour    Is acting on His part  
The union of your spirits here    Has caused Him to remain  
For whenever two or more of you    Are gathered in His name  
There is love    There is love*

Ministerial authorization is being entrusted to be a voice of the church. That has been my clear vision since beginning seminary in 2010. As a minister I will be part of a greater whole; I will speak truth as I know it through the lens of the UCC.

I am seeking ordination in the United Church of Christ. The presence of the Holy is all around us. It is my hope to help my congregants to see, and feel, and know this Holy presence, during worship, as well as in the everyday experiences that help bind us to one another and to God. As an ordained minister I will uphold a covenant with the United Church of Christ to be one of many voices crying out in the wilderness. My commitment is to remain true and faithful to my beliefs while living in covenant with the UCC, and to remain in open relationships of mutual love and support with other world religions, and with people that espouse no religion at all.

The Church is the Body of Christ. The members of the Church are the heart, hands, and feet of Christ in the world. “Church” in the larger sense is a worshiping community that honors

our past and is relevant to our future with a focus on social justice and an emphasis on love. “Church” in its minor sense is a gathering place, a house of worship, a physical building.

The Sabbath is a day set apart for rest; a day of intentional living with a focus on prayer; a day to immerse oneself in a loving and caring community.

Mission is the local, regional, national, and worldwide participation of seeking justice for all. Mission is being at least as concerned about others as we are with ourselves and attempting to guarantee that “A rising tide lifts all boats”.

We covenant as people of the UCC to be united and uniting toward past, present, and future members, and with people of other faiths and beliefs as well. I believe that we each have a primary covenant (individually) with God. Additionally, we covenant with each other as Christians (but are not limited to covenanting with only Christians), we form a covenant as a UCC church body, and we covenant with all of creation, to live peaceably, so that we may all be one.<sup>14</sup>

The seeds of justice were planted early in the pre-history of the UCC. From the Congregationalist background came the Burial Hill Declaration of 1865, which highlighted ecumenism and social justice. From the Christian church we have James O’Kelley, in 1792, objecting to excess power of bishops and advocating freedom from creeds and confessions. The Evangelical church gave us Martin Luther and his 95 Theses in the early 1800’s. The Reformed church kept things fresh with its always reformed (always true to heritage), always reforming (always pressing new ideas) theology. Each of these four traditions have historically embraced

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<sup>14</sup> Mack, *Writing Assignment*, Center for Progressive Renewal.

social justice issues. The justice theme has remained a strong presence in the life of the church since the formation of the UCC in 1957.<sup>15</sup>

The various settings of the United Church of Christ (Congregation, Association, Conference, Synod) utilize a non-hierarchical form of governance that encourages cohesion and agreement while allowing for individual freedoms. The Synod body makes non-binding resolutions and recommendations that are created by the people (delegates) for the people (individuals in congregations). Individual ministers, congregations, conferences, and associations are allowed to ultimately make their own decisions regarding matters of polity. We are to be in covenantal community even if we are not always in agreement. The polity and practice of the UCC depends on the respect and support of each for all. The UCC Statement of Faith is one crucial element in naming the unnamable, in an effort to bring clarity to a diversity of beliefs and experiences.

The UCC motto is “In essentials Unity, In non-essentials Diversity, In all things Charity.” What are the essentials? The UCC is United in the Love of God, Love of Christ, Love of self and neighbor. In non-essentials it is the striving to accept, understand, and allow for differences. To live and let live; love and let love. To be less concerned with the “right way” than with each finding “a way”. As a United and Uniting church we acknowledge and embrace the differences of the many streams flowing into the UCC. The last may be the most important ... In all things, live with a charitable heart. God is Love.

Ordination is accepting a sacred vow to do God’s work through a variety of ministerial channels, in this case in the body of the United Church of Christ. Ordination, like Baptism is a

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<sup>15</sup> Mack, Writing Assignment, Center for Progressive Renewal.

sacred ritual that binds the ordinand to God and to the community of believers through a communal ceremony. As consecration symbolically changes the ordinary bread and wine elements of Communion into the Body of Christ, ordination symbolically changes the one being ordained; granting them a new life with Christ. Ordination sanctifies one that is ordinary and changes them into an instrument of God and ceremoniously sets them apart. The ordinand, the ordained community and the worshipping community all covenant with God and one another during this holy pact to support and nurture one another. May it be so.