

## Call Story

All I've ever wanted to do is help people understand their value and belovedness. It's the song my life has been singing since I was a child. In some respect, it's the only thing I've ever really known how to do. This call has been part of every aspect of my life.

My call is to follow, preach, and teach the way of Jesus in this world: a way of justice, kindness and peacemaking. My call is to administer sacraments and point to the sacred. My call is to sit with the sick and hold their hands, to listen deeply and to love fully. My call is to follow the voice of God in this world and to speak the words that God has given me.

I was born and raised in Lynn, Massachusetts, to Jack and Teresa Murray. My parents and grandmother, Alice, raised my little sister, Catherine, and I in the Catholic Church where we each received our sacraments, served as altar servers and were active in the church youth group. Even as a child, I was deeply spiritual. That might have been because so many people in my life were talking to me about God, and it might have been something inherent within me. These days I believe it's a bit of both.

As a child, God was foreign to me. Someone far away from my own experience, but benevolent nonetheless. This image of God has changed throughout my life, but never more quickly or with more ramifications than when I heard for the first time that God loved me, Jennifer Murray, unconditionally and eternally. I was sitting on a green rug in Alton, New Hampshire, at a retreat with my church's youth group. On the wall there was a quilt that held the words to Psalm 139:14-16:

*For you created my innermost being / You knit me together in my mother's womb  
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made / Your works are wonderful,  
I know that very well.*

There it was, sewn on fabric so clearly it may as well have been stitched onto my heart.

I have a purpose. I have a calling. God created me to be exactly this person, here and now, full of love to share and hope to give. If it's true about me, that I am fearfully and wonderfully made, that I am fully and totally loved by God, then it must - it *must* be true for everyone.

Ever since that moment, my priority has always been communicating God's enduring love for each of us, and pointing toward how that love can and does change the world. My youth ministers recognized this in me early on and taught me how to lead youth groups and how to provide counseling to my peers. I was so floored by God's love that I had a tendency to be obnoxious about it. I would go out of my way to tell other people at youth group how much God loved them. "Don't you know that Jesus *died* for you so you could *live* and know *love*?! Don't you see how *special* you are?!" Both the theology and the tone behind these words have changed dramatically in the fifteen years since that time, but the essence of my call remains the same: Tell all the world that God is love, that God loves, that all one in the glory, goodness and love of God.

I was raised Catholic, so things like seminary and preaching didn't seem to be in the cards for me. If my thirteen year old self could see me now, seeking ordination in the United Church of Christ, she would probably be scandalized. But she would also be proud. She would be proud that I followed the path God had made and that on it, there has been much rejoicing. Because ordination seemed impossible for me, I reached for what seemed to make the most sense: teaching. I believed that teaching in the classroom would satisfy the hunger inside me and would help me communicate the love of God to a world that needed it - even if I couldn't use that specific language.

Yet over and over again God showed me that there was another way, that my path wasn't in the classroom but in the sanctuary. It wasn't in school buildings, it was in youth spaces. It wasn't in *The Scarlet Letter*, it was in the Gospel of Luke and the work of the prophets.

I left teaching to pursue ministry because the content I was called to teach had nothing to do with grades and everything to do with God's generous and unconditional love.

I pursued ministry - specifically children and youth ministry - because the best gift we can give the next generation is the knowledge that they are good and worthy of goodness. That they are loved and able to love. That they are beloved and so is everyone else.

I can't point to a singular moment when I knew I was called to ordination in the United Church of Christ, because there have been so many. There have also been many moments when I've doubted this call: Am I good enough? Am I called enough? Yet, in every moment of doubt, there has always been a little light echoing the soul-deep answer: yes, you are.

I think that's what makes it a calling more than a call. It's progressive, continuous, never ending, always changing. There has been a constant pull in my life, beckoning me toward the woman, the pastor, God has created me to be. There's always been a tug, a rope tied round my waist with the other end held in God's hand.

I knew it on that retreat in seventh grade, hearing for the first time that God loved me, created me and had a plan for my life. I knew it when I first gave a witness talk, a few years later on that same retreat, and felt the movement of the Holy Spirit in my preaching. I knew it on my first mission trip with South Church, when I stood on the holy dirt of Johns Island, South Carolina and prayed over our group in a way that shifted my insides and directed me on a path toward seminary. I may not have had the words for it then, I may not have been able to imagine a world where I spend this one precious life ministering to God's people in a role I love, but our

God is a creative God, a God who makes a way when we aren't sure there is one, a God who is constantly pulling us toward the people we are called to be. This call and love from God is the rock on which I have built my life.

When anxiety builds, when life gets hard, when the messy parts of life rear their head, the question I always ask myself is: what is the ground I stand on? What is my firm foundation, the one thing I have never doubted? That firm foundation has always been God's love and the call God has placed on my life to minister to those in need of Good News. God's call has been there my whole life. A constant guide and companion, a quiet knowledge that within me there has been a call to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with a God who mothers us all.

## Baptism

In May of 2019, my cousin Eddie passed away. He had struggled with addiction for his entire life. He spent months at a time in rehab facilities for alcohol and drugs. He had been to AA and NA. He had seen countless therapists. He had a loving, supportive family and network of friends. He still died of an overdose.

I was already at church for the day when they found him, so my fiance had to call to tell me what happened. It was 10am on Confirmation Sunday. Worship was set to begin at 10:30. That morning we would baptize seven teenagers into the body of Christ and then confirm our confirmation class as full members in the church. In the same breath where death seemed to reign, there was also the promise of life<sup>1</sup>. It's hard to explain exactly what it meant, to hear in one moment that a loved one had died, and in the next to be standing in front of teenagers and proclaiming the words, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. One God, Mother of us all."

One God, Mother of us all.

When we say those words, we are proclaiming a life-altering, soul-wakening, heart-opening, death-ending truth: that all are welcome in God's love. That this life is not the last life. That this God is all goodness, all love, all care. That there will never be a moment when this beloved child of the most High God will not belong to love, will not be marked with the promise of resurrection<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Cost of Discipleship*, D. Bonhoeffer pg 256. "It is their baptism into the Body of Christ which assures all Christians of their full share in the life of Christ and the Church." For Boenhoeffer, and also for me, baptism is a moment of the meeting of two realities: the fullness of life in Christ and the witnessing of saints in the hereafter. This was made even more clear on the morning referenced above.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 2:38-39

Baptism Sundays are my favorite. Along with Communion. And confirmation. And Christmas pageant Sundays. I genuinely find something to love every Sunday. But baptism Sundays are my favorite because they are the point from which all these other life-giving Christian traditions flow.

In *Worship for the Whole People of God* Ruth C. Duck describes baptism as “sign, symbol and enactment of God’s self-giving love and grace, embodied in Jesus and poured out in the Holy Spirit.” Baptism is a ritual that ties us to the life of Jesus and to the whole Body of Christ. In baptism, we are baptized *into* Christ and the Church and the Christian life. We are made one with every Christian who has ever lived and who will ever live.

Baptism, as well as communion, is transcendent. When a person is baptized (be they an infant, a child, or an adult) they are invited into the entire Christian project: to love and serve God and neighbor, to seek justice and make peace, to in turn welcome and baptize new Christians into the faith, to live a life pointed always toward resurrection. Essentially, each baptized person is invited to follow and listen to Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

Through baptism, every worshipper is made a minister.<sup>4</sup> Every child of God is given the gifts to witness, to serve, to prepare the way for Christ on this Earth. Baptism brings us through the separation of our Earthly life and into the unity God so desires to have with us. I don’t know that I am convinced of original sin, or sin in its culturally understood definition as a list of misdeeds. I am convinced that sin is real, and that we humans are in need of redemption from the ways we can be taken in by the world’s messages of greed, self-interest and apathy. I am convinced that the world is broken and in need of healing. I am convinced that there are ways we have been separated from God: through decisions, cultures and circumstances, through systems

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 9:35

<sup>4</sup> *Cost of Discipleship* D. Bonhoeffer pg 256.

much larger than the one human life we all must live. I am not convinced, however, that we begin in brokenness.

I was raised in a faith that talked about original sin in the same manner one might talk about paying taxes: always present and inescapable. When my godson, Alex, was born, I was able to stand with his parents and my cousin, Eddie, his godfather, as the priest blessed Alex and it was a beautiful, moving moment. The beauty and depth of that experience was not because suddenly Alex was no longer shrouded in sin, but was welcomed into the abundance of life in Christian community.

It is with eyes on our baptism that Christians are called to treat one another as kin, as loved ones, with deep belonging. It is with the mark of baptism on our heads that we see the souls of one another, that we set a wide and open table for Communion, that we open the doors to every child of God. Baptism does not set us apart - it welcomes us and everyone else in.

A few months ago, a young person that I know and care for through a program on Star Island asked me if I would baptize him this summer. After witnessing this young man grow and change, face adversity and find belonging, for him to decide that this is the life he wants, this is the faith and the community that he wants - I can think of no greater privilege and honor than to stand with him and speak the words that promise life, love, hope and resurrection.

“I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. One God, Mother of us all.”

Indeed, she is. Indeed, through baptism, this tangible, beautiful sacrament, we get to be one with She who calls us beloved.

## The Lord's Supper

One of the best parts of my role as Minister for Youth and Families is explaining the sacraments of the Church to children. For them, baptism is the thing we do where we pour water on babies and they cry. Or it's the time in worship when the pastors walk an infant halfway up the aisles and back again and everyone gets to see how cute the baby is. They love it, but they aren't sure why. They know it means something significant, but it still feels a little vague.

Communion is different. Ask a first grader what they know about communion and you'll hear things like "Big hunks of bread." "I don't like grape juice very much." "It's when we get snacks in church." But you'll also hear: "It feels like family." "This is something that Jesus did." "Everyone gets to have some, even my friend who has never been here before and even my baby sister who is just a baby."

Everyone gets some. It feels like family. This is something that Jesus did. Honestly, if that was all they ever knew about communion, that might be enough. But it can't be, because what comes next is just so much *more*. Communion teaches us how to live the Christian life. It is an act of sharing, recognizing and honoring sacrifice, welcoming others and believing that God's healing and hope is possible.<sup>5</sup> All in the simple act of eating bread and drinking juice.

Even though that first grader knows that everyone is welcome at Jesus' table, telling them that Judas got to eat there too scandalizes them. "Jesus *ate food* with *Judas*?!" Yes, he did. "How could Jesus do that?! Didn't Jesus know what Judas would do?!" Yes, he did. And he ate with him anyway. Jesus knew that those around the table would deny, betray and abandon him. And

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 22:14-22

still, he broke bread and told them how much he loved them. Still, he offered up bread as his body and wine as his blood. Still, he told them to remember him.

Can you imagine the grief that Jesus felt in those moments? All this work, all the sacrifices he had made, and here he was sitting at a table with those he loved most, telling them goodbye without any of them seeing this supper for what it was: his last. Can we imagine the grief? Can we imagine the love that gave him the power to bear it while he sat there, listening to his followers argue over who was the most devout, all while knowing that none of them would be at his side by morning?

If for no other reason, we celebrate communion to remember that love. To connect ourselves to it. To remember that leaving one another behind is not an option. To recognize the sacrifice Jesus made, to understand the human motivation for violence is only ever mitigated by the human instinct for love and connection. The day before his execution, Jesus showed his followers (and us) that the only antidote to violence and hatred is connection, love and commitment to one another.<sup>6</sup>

Communion, and the lessons it offers, provide a valuable reminder for high schoolers as well. Every year on the South Church mission trip, we spend Sunday night in worship together. A few years ago, as can often happen when fifty teenagers are gathered in one place, there was a particularly cliquey vibe among the group that was quickly becoming unhealthy. We decided that the way to balance all this out would be to worship together, to wipe the slate clean in the way that only worship can, to begin again by reminding ourselves of what is important and why we're there.

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 22

We sat in a circle, all of us facing one another, with a folding table in the middle. The juice was poured into a styrofoam cup. The bread was broken onto paper plates. It was simple, temporary, and silent. We created a covenant together centered on how we would take care of each other throughout the week, then we sealed it by remembering the covenant that Jesus made with us. We broke the bread and poured the juice. I turned to the youth around me and gave them directions for how to share this gift.

“Look one another in the eyes and tell each other ‘This is the bread of life, broken for you. This is the cup of blessing poured out for you.’ Remember, that the bread has been broken so it might be shared. The cup has been poured so all might drink.”

One of the many beauties of communion is that it is tangible. Celebrating communion requires us to move, touch, eat and look one another in the eye. We are required to receive. To receive each other as fully welcome and good. To witness the risen Christ in the person offering us communion. To embody<sup>7</sup> that for one another as we share communion.

Looking around the room, there were very few dry eyes that night. The holy spirit had shown up more miraculously than any of us could have imagined. We often joke that no one gets through a mission trip without shedding some form of a tear, but it had never happened as early in the week as it did that year. All of us, one body, one table, were moved by the connection found in communion. We were stunned by the beauty. Awed by the grace. We came away from that moment ready for a week of good and hard work because the Holy Spirit had shown us we belonged. We belonged with one another and above all, we belonged to God.

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<sup>7</sup> *The Cost of Discipleship*, D Bonhoeffer pg 251 “In the two sacraments he encounters us bodily and makes us partakers in the fellowship and communion of his Body, and they are both closely linked to this word.” Communion as a physical, embodied act, recenters faith as a *lived* and *practical* experience.

## Person of Christ

A seminary professor once told me that I had a very incarnational theology. It was early enough in my journey that I didn't fully understand what she meant by that. What I take her words to mean now is that I walk through the world believing that God lives within each of us, seeking to heal and transform the world through human hands.

Nowhere is this more evident, for me and for many Christians, than in the person of Christ. From the human, messy elements of Jesus of Nazarus<sup>8</sup>, to the loving kindness of Jesus as rabbi<sup>9</sup>, to the pain-ridden crucified Son<sup>10</sup>, to the gleaming, supernatural resurrected Christ<sup>11</sup>, we meet all the ways the Holiest of Holies is incarnated in the world.

Throughout seminary I would learn about beautiful theological phrases and theories. Every time I learned something new, somewhere in the depths of my heart I would hear the words:

“Great. That’s beautiful. But how does it walk around the world?”

I didn't want a theology or a faith that only had a hold in classrooms or ivory towers. I knew I could never stand in front of God's people, a people yearning for truth, hungry for love, desperate for hope and offer them a theology they couldn't put into practice. I wanted a theology with legs.

So thank God Jesus walked around the world the same as we do: one foot in front of the other.

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<sup>8</sup> Mark 11:12-20

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 19:14

<sup>10</sup> Luke 23:46

<sup>11</sup> Luke 24:13-35

Jesus lived the life of a refugee, a low-wage worker, a rebel, a teacher, a reformer, an outlaw, a prisoner. Those theologies I encountered in seminary were all reflections of the life of God incarnate - God walking through the world in Jesus, teaching us to love and love well.

One of the most interesting and soul-awakening parts of following Jesus, for me, is the fact that he walked the earth. Barbara Brown Taylor in her book *An Altar In The World* shares how she looked at Jesus on the cross one day while at church, turned to the person next to her and remarked that something was missing. What was it? Then she realized that this crucified Christ was hairless. In reality, Jesus would have been sweaty, bloody, and messy, multiple times throughout his life. He wore sandals and walked from town to town. He knew the physical torment, the messiness our bodies go through. There's something so intimate about that. Jesus' frail, messy physical body ties us to him in the way of shared experiences. Jesus knows what it is to have a body.

But even more than the messy bits of physically being human, Jesus knew what it was to have emotions that wracked his body and mind. In the Garden of Gethsemane, he cries out to God and asks this cup to be taken from him. At the end, of course, he says "but your will be done" but right up to that you can sense his pain and the wavering he feels. In the temple, his emotions rage and he flips tables and casts people out. He quite literally makes a mess.

All of this is to say that, perhaps, messiness is not a bad thing. Being messy doesn't take away the deeply perfect love that lives in you. Jesus' messy humanity didn't take away the Divine that was dually present within him. Being messy meant he understands us right now and then and forever.

This has never been more clear to me than on Ash Wednesday, 2018. I was in the midst of CPE, finishing seminary and working close to full time. This particular day also happened to

be Valentine's Day. My CPE program was at Holy Family Hospital in Methuen, Ma. and on Ash Wednesday, we were sent out to the far reaches of the hospital to offer ashes to anyone who sought them.

By the end of the day, my soul was so raw I could feel it on my skin. I had touched my fingers to the foreheads of countless people, uttering the words: "from dust you came, to dust you shall return."

At the end of the day, right before it was time to check in and leave, I stopped into my last room. In the bed lay an elderly woman in deep pain. Her eyes were shut tight and her body tensed against the pain in her hip, she cried out and moaned, her hair was matted to her forehead and it looked like she hadn't had real rest in days. In a moment of pain, she reached out and swiped at the cups of Ginger Ale and water, making the floor sticky and wet.

I walked toward her and called her name, asking if she'd like to receive ashes.

She nodded slightly. I knelt by her bedside. I took one of her hands in mine and with my other hand, swept her hair away from her forehead. Then, these words came:

"You are a beloved child of God. From dust you came, to dust you shall return. Beautiful, beloved and whole."

The second my thumb touched her forehead, her whole body relaxed. Clarity came to her eyes and voice as she released a soul-deep sigh. I was about to stand up when she squeezed my hand. She turned to me and asked if I would hear her confession. "I'm not a priest," I said, "But I'm happy to go find one for you."

She didn't wait for me to find a priest, a man, anyone resembling the clergy of her childhood. She just unleashed. Out poured every part of her life. Every trauma, everything she'd ever done. Everything that had ever been done to her. So much of what she believed to be sins

were actually so far out of her control. So much of the shame she carried came from a church that blamed her, that taught her to fear a far-away God. All of it came pouring out of her, while we stayed holding hands. I smoothed her hair on her forehead and knelt on the floor by her bed. I watched her body unfurl, like all this pain that lived within her came not from a muscle but a spirit. Finally, she gave an open hearted cry, saying “I’m sorry, God!”

What do you say when shame is the only language spoken?

What do you give when pain ripples through every word?

We give what Jesus gives: love and compassion. You clear a path in the wilderness that brings you to a God who is merciful, honest and loving.

“You are so loved. You are so cared for. You are so forgiven.” Over and over again.

“You are loved. You are cared for. You are forgiven.”

Slowly her breath and her body calmed and she looked me in the eyes.

“Does God still love me?”

Oh, my darling. Oh, you beautiful child of God, “Yes. Forever and forever, yes.”

Jesus gives us that “yes.” Jesus walked around the world as God-with-us and assured us and continues to assure us, beyond any doubt or fear or feeling of unworthiness, that God loves us. That the Creator deems us beloved. That there is no shame, no sin, no separation that can keep us from God’s love. Is there any news better than that? For me, that is why I profess and live the Good News of Jesus Christ.

## **Sin, Redemption, Forgiveness**

I used to believe that sin was a checklist God made of every wrong thing I'd ever done, every misstep ever made, ever swear, lie or careless action. In fact, the church I grew up in had a painting on the ceiling of a man with a long white beard and an arm around a silver orb. I suppose that man was supposed to be God and the orb was supposed to be the Earth.

The message was clear: God was always watching.

Do you remember the woman I met on Ash Wednesday? After she'd shared her inner fears, her shame and guilt, everything that kept her separate from Love, she turned to me and said: "I've never told anyone what I've just told you. I've been hurt by so many people. By so many men. I couldn't say all that to a priest. Does it still count?"

Count. How much of our faith do we spend quantifying? Why did we teach people that checklists and numbers matter to God more than people, more than lived experience? We have a savior that walked around the world and loved, cursed<sup>12</sup>, laughed, sweated, suffered, died and rose again, and we still want to know if our honest sharing counts with God.

I wasn't sure what to tell her. To a Catholic that confession would certainly not count. In my own theology, it certainly did, but would I be overstepping my bounds to tell her so?

So I asked her: "Do you feel better now? Do you feel like it counts?"

She considered that for a moment and said, "Maybe."

I told her that one of the chaplains was a priest and would make rounds in the morning. If she wanted to be doubly sure, I'd be happy to ask him to pop in to talk with her. The next afternoon I found my way to her room and checked in to see how she was doing. She was sitting

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<sup>12</sup> Mark 11:12-20

up, her hair had been combed and her face had been washed. There were fresh flowers on her tray table and there was even a shadow of a smile on her face.

She told me: “The priest came and talked with me, but I decided not to give him my confession. Once was enough.”

Once was enough. It seems that once is likely enough for God, too.<sup>13</sup>

These days, I’ve found that sin is less about what we do and more about how we live. I know that sounds like an arbitrary distinction. I think that’s because a list of misdeeds that God is keeping track of also feels arbitrary.

What is the purpose of acknowledging sin?

Sin is a state of being without God. It is the place in our hearts and lives where we leave God behind, where we neglect that love and push it away.

Sin is not a checklist - it is a path we walk down. It is a separation that we choose.

There’s a reason, both theologically and historically, why the Ten Commandments prohibit antisocial behaviors. There’s a reason why the greatest commandment is “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.”

To quote author, social worker and shame researcher Brene Brown: “we are hardwired for connection.” Connection with God. Connection with one another. Connection with ourselves.

When we separate ourselves by dehumanizing and harming others, we separate ourselves from God. When we deny the parts of God that live in us, through hatred and mistrust of our minds, souls and bodies, we separate ourselves from God. When we abandon the love that God has offered us, we separate from God.

But here’s the thing: God will not leave us. God has never left us.

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<sup>13</sup> *The Cost of Discipleship*, D Bonhoeffer pg 276 “Just as Christ died once and for all, so we are baptized once and for all. Both events are in the strictest sense *unrepeatable*.”

Even in the days of the prophets, when the Israelites went astray, God called the prophets to lead her people home. God is not the one that leaves, that abandons, we are. She's forever leaving us a trail of breadcrumbs to find our way back home.

Sometimes I think of it in this way: there's a rope tied around each of our waists and the other end is with God.

We may turn and go off in any direction we like, but we are still connected to God. No matter how far we go, God is right behind us. All we have to do is turn around.

Isn't that what it means to repent? To turn around, change direction, close the gap. It's in the separation that sin finds its home. It's in the distance between how we're living and how we're called to live.

And thank Heavens that we follow a God who forgives, a God who is merciful, a God who is generous with grace.

That's part of what is special about the time of confession and forgiveness that we practice on Communion Sundays. We get the chance to clear the air, to reel the rope back in, to turn our face towards God again. And every single time we are assured: you are forgiven. You are loved. You are welcome. Put another way by Pastor and writer Nadia Bolz-Weber:

“In the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Christ we see that God is so *for* us and *with* us that we can no longer be defined according to death, a religion-based worthiness system or even the categories of late-stage capitalism. We are who God says we are: the forgiven, broken and blessed children of God; the ones to whom God draws near. Nothing else gets to tell us who we are.”

In God's commitment to forgiveness, we are reminded that all that separates us has been cast away and all that there is left to do is to come together around the table and take part in Christ's feast.

## **Resurrection and Salvation**

During seminary, I took a preaching course in which our final project was to write and deliver a funeral sermon. We were given a list of possible scriptures and a list of fictional people we could center the sermon around. My person was a young black man named Timothy who died as a result of gang violence. I had just barely come to terms with the idea of death *at all* and here I was trying to write a sermon meant to comfort a family and point toward salvation and resurrection.

Then came John 14. Specifically, John 14:1-7. “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places... I go to prepare a place for you.”

While Timothy’s life was fictional, there are a million people in Timothy’s position who are not. They are real, flesh and blood, they know pain and suffering. They find themselves on paths and in places where they do not belong. We have developed a system and a country that intentionally casts people out - that insists on the existence of inequality.

But Jesus is very clear: there is room for you and me and everyone in his father’s house. There is room for all of us in God’s family. The world we live in right now is unjust and unforgiving - but the one Jesus prepares for us, the world that comes with salvation, the resurrected life - in that life there is room for everyone, a place for everyone.

In resurrection, the dead and broken things are healed and alive. In resurrection the hopelessness and despair we feel is made new with relief and joy. Salvation comes as a reunifying moment - when all belong, when none are cast out, when all of God’s children are safe in their Heavenly Parent’s arms. This is as much a spiritual reality and call as it is a physical one.

In *A Theology of Liberation*, Gustavo Gutierrez offers the following:

“It seems clear today that the work of the Church is not to save in the sense of ‘guaranteeing Heaven.’ The work of salvation is a reality which occurs in history. This work gives to this historical becoming of humankind its profound unity and its deepest meaning.”

We often talk about salvation in quantifiable terms: one is or is not saved. One is a sinner or one is redeemed. This in-or-out line of thinking is so in line with our secular culture. Have we noticed that? Salvation in the church is often seen as the way *out* of our secular culture, when the idea of substitutionary atonement is actually perfectly in line with the win-lose financial and social culture we participate in today.

But what if salvation wasn’t win-or-lose? What if, as Gutierrez suggests, salvation is the work of God unifying humanity: with Godself and with each other?

Growing up, I was obsessed with the idea of salvation. I wanted to know if my piety would save me. I wanted to know if the afterlife had a place for me. I was frantic at the idea that I would be left out of some great spiritual homegoing. Back when we all had Myspace accounts, I reached out to a youth minister in my church and asked about this. What do I have to do to ensure that I’m okay? That’s I’m really saved?

My youth minister told me that salvation isn’t a one-and-done event, but a daily commitment to God. I should be clear that this commitment to God, in our context back then, had more to do with me, myself and I and very little to do with the community I am called to love. While this offered some comfort back then - at least there was something I could *do* that would make sure I’d be saved - that comfort didn’t extend to the people in my life and it brought me no closer to unity with those I loved and those I would never know.

Earlier in this paper, I shared about my beliefs that sin is a separation from God. I shared that sin is not a list of misdeeds, but a state of being, a walk we take away from goodness and

love. With that in mind, it makes sense to plainly state that which God is saving us from. God saves us from a life without God. A life without goodness, grace, truth and love. God saves us from a life without true friendship and community. God saves us from our greed, selfishness and fear by instilling in us a sense of honesty, transparency and love - a love that extends to everyone we meet.

Jesus has shown us through his life, death and resurrection, that salvation is linked with community, with communal well-being. In his life, Jesus broke down barriers in order to bring people together. He set aside traditions and rules that kept people separate and instead taught them to see the Holy in one another. He taught us to value our friendships, to take care of each other, he created space for people to come and be with him. After his resurrection, when the brokenness of his body was healed and the wholeness of his Divinity was made known, the first thing he did was find company. He went to the Upper Room. He greeted the women at the tomb. He trekked the road to Emmaus with companions. The lonely tomb was emptied as the whole, resurrected, healed Christ found his people.

In resurrection, the broken things of the world are healed. Broken bodies and broken hearts and broken systems are stitched back together and made new. In salvation, we are unified in the body of the risen Christ.

## **Church in the World**

Christianity in America has received some well-earned criticism for being out of touch, exclusionary and hypocritical. We know that the Christian church, specifically in the United States, has too often sided with white supremacy, homophobia and misogyny. We know that there are poison roots that need to be dug out. It does us little good to ignore or undervalue that critique.

However, that is neither the end nor the whole of the Christian story. In the words of Serene Jones, theologian and president of Union Theological Seminary, when speaking about the shifting religious landscape in America: “It’s not just figuring out how to drill a new well, it’s redefining what water is.”

Often I think about the people who have rejected faith, or who have never known it to begin with. What would it mean for them to know that community, love and connection are possible? What would it mean for the Church to be a force of love so great and unconditional that it could not be ignored? What would it mean for the Church to own its problems and seek to heal them, to pull out the poison roots and instead plant seeds in fertile soil?

That Church? Well, to be honest, that Church is happening in congregations right here and now all across our country. Beloved and flawed people who are doing their best to be part of God’s healing in a broken world.

In Andover during the fall of 2018 there was an afternoon when it felt like the world was ending. A wrong button was pushed somewhere in Ohio and in New England fires started, windows and houses exploded. A young man died. People lived out of hastily packed suitcases for months. Standing in the church parking lot that afternoon, the air around us sparked with that electric feeling of chaos. For the days after, we slept in hotels or on friends’ couches. We

navigated collective trauma, checked on friends, congregated in one of the few coffeeshops that still had power.

We couldn't worship at South Church, so West Parish Church, another UCC congregation nearby, welcomed us to worship with them. Walking in that day I was absolutely overcome at what it felt like to see so many people I loved gathered in one place, after all the fear and uncertainty of the last few days. After all that had happened, one thing was clear: we were not alone. We were together. We were loved. God was with us.

I thought: "Everyone should feel this in their lives."

Now, I obviously don't want everyone to feel what we felt in those days.

But I do believe everyone should get to feel unconditional love and welcome from God and community. People should know that they belong.

I say "belong" and mean it in the way Brene Brown talks about true belonging, rather than fitting in. There are plenty of churches and faith communities that say they offer belonging when they really mean fitting in. I've attended and joined them. Maybe you have, too. Fitting in is not part of God's hope for us. Fitting in is not the call of the Church.

Church is a place where you get to belong. Church is the place you and all your messiness, all your divine goodness, all the contradictions of being human, get to find a home.

Evangelism is a way to create true belonging for a people deeply in need of it. Evangelism, sharing the Good News, means showing people to the seat at the table that has already been reserved for them. We don't bestow God's love on people - we show the way toward it. God's love isn't ours to give, but we can point to it. We can dance around it. We can set a table of bread and juice and remind people that God provides every feast.

Covid-19 has reinforced the importance of connection and community - all while making it nearly impossible to gather with those we love and care about. And yet, just like that morning at West Parish Church, Covid has taught us that Church is not a building.

Church is marching in the streets, demanding racial and climate justice.

Church is baking bread and writing letters for people who are lonely.

Church is holding one another in prayer.

Church is listening, building relationships, holding hands when life gets hard.

Church is coming together in whatever way we are able, using whatever resources we have, to honor and worship God.