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PART I- MY JOURNEY, MY CALL

Even when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, ... you are with me. (Ps. 23:4)

I splashed warm water onto my face, careful not to send too much to puddle on my small bathroom vanity. I felt too tired to make a mess. I dried my face slowly with a towel, clinging to the comfort of its softness, not wanting to stop- not wanting to be ready for bed. The nighttime was when I felt most alone. Dread bubbled up inside me and I said aloud, “Have you forgotten about me?” Silence answered, as expected. I had never heard God’s voice speak English. I sighed, feeling miserable. I slumped from the bathroom to the living room to grab my sweatshirt from the couch. As I pulled it over my head, I heard my phone ding- and then chime, and then a buzz. Well that’s weird, I thought, noting the time. It was around 9 pm in Guam- which was a little late to be getting schedule updates from work (usually the reason my phone would ding). I walked over to it, looked at the screen, and blinked. There were nearly 100 new alerts- emails, texts, Facebook messages, WhatsApp. I’m a lifelong introvert, and not one to really “do” social media – I’d never seen this many messages on my phone at one time. They were from friends and family, people reaching out to send their love, condolences, to tell me they cared. As I stared at my phone, glowing bright with so much love, so many reminders of empathy, friendship, and connection, I knew this was also from God. “Ok, so you haven’t forgotten,” I spoke aloud again, but this time through tears. I knew in that moment that as much as I may want to deny the existence and presence of God in the coming months or years- I would simply not be able to do so. I knew I would never be able to “un”-believe in the Divine’s love for me. And I understood with my entire being that God walks with us in the dark.

Let me start closer to the beginning of my story. I was born in the early eighties in Maryland to an ex-Catholic father and an historically Congregationalist mother. They found their church home in a Methodist congregation. It was a vibrant church with many people, many children, many opportunities for service, involvement, and enrichment. Church was fun. I remember loving the stories and songs of Sunday School. My brother and I served as Acolytes, I sang in the choir and played in the bell choir as far back as I can remember. My mother attended Bible Studies and adult social groups- I was often there with her. Good Shepherd UMC felt like a second home.

I credit my mother for how much time we spent at the church. She had grown up in a church community, and it felt important to her to pass that source of strength on to my brother

and I. She is a faithful and extremely hard-working person. She modeled an appreciation of ritual and dogma that I believe I learned a great deal from, and in some ways adopted. My father modeled a personal love for and dependence on God. When we missed our church's service one Sunday because we needed to help a neighbor, he led us in prayers and hymns as a family-teaching us in a very real way that God lived within our love and humility.

In daily life, our family was divided. My parents divorced when I was about 3 years old. But in Christ, we were still very much a family. I didn't have the vocabulary or even awareness to explain as a preschooler, but part of my love for church in my earliest days was the unifying love with which it could endure even broken relationships.

My father returned to his childhood home in Chicago when I was about 8, and fairly soon after he returned to his former faith of Catholicism. I moved with my mother to Maine when I was 11 and attended First Congregational Church of South Paris with her. It was a National Association of Congregational Churches (NACC) congregation, which was a return to roots for my mother. I also joined AWANA, a Bible-based youth organization, through a new friend I made in Maine. Growing into tween and teen years, I had the coincidental and fortunate experience of being presented with all sorts of new (to me) and strange ways of doing things at my father's church, while being encouraged to begin to think about my faith in a personal way by the youth group leader at my mother's church. The differences between Catholics and Protestants raised questions I was nurtured to think about. I explored with curiosity.

One night I had my first experience with Christ. I was about 11 or 12 and visiting my father. My older brother and I shared a room when we stayed with our dad, so Tim could hear me crying. I don't remember what was upsetting me, but I do know our move to Maine had been very tough on me and I struggled often with my self-worth. I believe I was overwhelmed with

feelings of loss and loneliness that night. My brother was a very good brother. He understood me better than anyone- he'd experienced much of what I had with me and was always a patient listener. He came and sat next to me and asked what was wrong.

I explained my sadness, fear, and confusion. Tim offered that in the times he didn't understand what to do, he relied on God. He suggested that I invite Jesus into my heart, and rely on him as a friend. Tim left me and I prayed. For the first time, I asked Jesus into my heart, asked for his friendship. A sensation I will never forget but find difficult to describe overtook me. It was like a waterfall in the very middle of my being. I had the sense that something truly exceptional was happening, though to this day I'm at loss to define what exactly the phenomenon meant. I believe it to be a kind of baptism. Though I support infant baptism (more on that later), and trust in the sanctity of my own christening, I cannot deny something absolutely special and sacred happening when I first accepted a personal relationship with God. This moment was one I returned to often in times of doubt.

As I graduated high school and began college, my questions of spirituality became overshadowed by a mountain of other questions I felt pressure to answer. *Who was I? What was I doing with my life?* Etc. I labeled myself "basically Christian" and focused on other areas. I had been diagnosed with Chronic Major Depressive Disorder when I was 15 and prescribed an SSRI anti-depressant (the most common type). Like so many teens are, I'd been successfully convinced my body was unacceptable. I was struggling with a learning disability that wouldn't be discovered for almost another decade. And I'd been accepted to my top choice school- fairly prestigious and respected for its academic rigor: The University of Chicago.

My knees had begun to buckle under the weight of shame and confusion surrounding my learning disability in the last couple years of high school. To cope, I'd begun to disorder my

eating. The demands of my new environment in Chicago (where I felt like a public-school fish in a private school pond), became too much for me to functionally hold. I became severely bulimarexic and took a leave of absence in my second year. In a dark moment of realization, I looked in the mirror. My jeans hung off my body. I touched a long knot of scar tissue on my head from where I'd fallen in the dorm shower (I'd awoken terrified in a pool of blood and water, but only had had the strength to walk back to my bed, passing out for several hours before going to the hospital). I let my fingers pass over it and through my thin wispy hair. I'd been told my heartbeat was weakened and slow. My teeth were riddled with cavities. This was not at all what I wanted. I realized I'd achieved some warped fantasy I'd been pursuing- its fulfillment had left me profoundly empty. Theologically at this time I was very uncertain, but I never doubted the existence of God, and I believed fully in the goodness of Love. I knew that if I wanted to live, I needed to love myself – better. And I very much wanted to live. I returned to school in Chicago but decided to apply to transfer to the University of Maine, believing it would be a healthier environment in which I could continue to recover.

Unfortunately, problems left unresolved (whether intentionally or not) tend to follow us. My learning disability continued to be treated as a mood disorder, and school in Maine seemed to be just as difficult as in Chicago. About six months after beginning at UMaine, on my 21st birthday, I was sexually assaulted. I told no one. Eight months later, I was assaulted again by a second perpetrator. The first attack had been internalized as shame easily, the second attack was infuriating. In both instances, I felt completely powerless. I held a combination of rage, frustration, confusion, pain, and too frequent changes in antidepressant medication (because no particular one seemed to be doing “the trick”) that lead me to seriously consider suicide. I didn't like the idea of hurting my loved ones, but I couldn't see my life getting better, and the pain felt

unbearable. But the little light within me, the light that wanted to shine for many more tomorrows, was able to talk to my best friend when they asked the right question. He asked if I was thinking of suicide. I poured out my plans for ending my life, but they no longer seemed logical. Shared with someone who loved me, they didn't make as much sense. I had realized the preciousness of life in the years before this point- I needed to remind myself of that again. I was in pain, and I wanted to end *that*- not **me**.

With one foot steadily (arduously) in front of the other, I finished college, and graduated with my bachelor's degree. Uncertain about my next steps, I moved to Portland (Maine) to be near my brother. I thought of this as a "gap year". I wanted to pursue a Master's degree, but would once I felt like I had a better handle on my mood.

More than once I've been asked the get-to-know-you type question: What was the best year of your life? My answer has been: 2007, the year after college. I found a place I felt happy in Portland. I belonged. In a way, it's funny to call this year "the best", because I was still truly in a great deal of pain. Life was worthwhile to me, but very dark. I had barely touched the wounds of assault, and still struggled a great deal with my self-worth. But I could easily spend time with my brother, my very favorite person in the world, and had found an amazing community of support through incredible roommates- found by chance (one for which I am forever grateful) on Craigslist.

At this point in my life, "basically Christian" was still a good fit. I wanted a God like Santa Claus, one for whom being good enough meant that there was hope of one's wishes being granted. I was still frustrated and angry, but uncomfortable with the idea of being angry at God. I still believed in a God that was Good, that was Love- that didn't want people to suffer. But the

amount of suffering that seemed to exist in our lives- in my life- made for questions that were too uncomfortable to sit with or explore.

So I joined the Navy.

Ok, first I began a master's program feeling confident and excited that my depression seemed to be under control. Within a month, all the terrible feelings of my last school year seemed to be back, and I was failing. I realized there was a missing puzzle piece. I saw a psychiatric specialist who diagnosed a learning disability. This was both validating and devastating. It was a huge Eureka! that explained the issues I'd been having since high school, but I'd pursued Anthropology planning to spend my life in academia. Knowing I had this challenge, but not knowing how to manage it was daunting. I decided school needed to wait until I knew how to do it.

But I didn't know what my next step was to be. I felt a tug that I now feel were God's very quietest tones pushing me toward a recruiter's office. I planned to enlist as a Religious Programs Specialist or "RP", but I scored so highly on my entry exams that I was put into a Linguistic Program. Excited to learn Korean, I was shipped off to boot camp. But this job needed a Top-Secret Security Clearance. I was embarrassed by my mental health issues, and furious at the stigma they cast in my life. (I'd been denied a place in the Peace Corps because of my experience.) In an effort to outrun them, I lied in the (incredibly thorough) background investigation, and, because of course I was found out, I was not able to be granted the necessary clearance. I had the choice at that point to either return home or choose from a few less interesting and less exciting jobs available (RP was not one of them). I'd felt like I was "supposed" to join the Navy. My faith had been growing, moving itself from the backburner of my heart slowly forward. I'd been the "Religious Petty Officer" in my boot camp division, and

through this job had spent extra happy hours at the base Chapel. I'd been feeling like somehow, and weirdly, I was in the right spot. I chose to stay in the Navy, with a job in administrative support.

I felt like this job was a stepping-stone. I, again, had joined the Navy seeking *something*, but that something was difficult for me to articulate. After about a year, the *something* began to reveal itself. I was being called to serve those who served, spiritually. In 2010, I felt I was being called to military chaplaincy. I began stalking Chaplains. I made appointments with every one I could find to hear their stories and ask about their jobs. I had years left on my military contract, and I was stationed in Japan, so seminary would have to wait. But that was Ok- I had a clear sense of purpose, and an ever-growing sense of faith. I was seeing God and seeking God more and more. Boot-camp training, and merging into military culture, had allowed me to learn new things about myself, and to focus my thinking in a different way. I came to realize that my questions about the Divine were not signs against a call to ministry, but the opposite. My questions were like plants along my path- some beautifully complex flowers, some thorny bushes, but all had their place, and none had ever made me doubt in the existence or the Goodness of our Creator, there was simply a lot more I wanted to learn about- a lot more I wanted to experience.

I did very well in the Navy and advanced quickly. When it came time to choose orders, I wanted to stay overseas, and relocated to Guam. Had I known of my father's impending diagnosis, I would've chosen differently. Shortly before I began my tour on the tiny island, he was diagnosed with IPF- an uncommon and terminal lung condition. He waited for about a year on a donor list, hoping for a transplant. A few weeks before Christmas, the call came, there was a lung available. It was uncertain whether he'd survive the surgery, but without it, he wouldn't

have had much longer. My command flew me to Chicago to be with him. Though he did survive the surgery, the lung was never really accepted by his body. He continued to remain hospitalized. I returned to Guam with an anxious heart, but with continued gratitude for God's presence.

I'd sought a faith community soon after arriving in Guam. There were few choices; pickings had felt slim. I wasn't yet sure what denomination was "home", but my going guess was Methodist. I couldn't find a local church that seemed to feel right, so attended Sunday services at the bases (Guam has an Air Force base at its north end and a Navy base at its south). A co-worker invited me to a Friday night Bible Study offered in an American missionary's home. Most of the attendees were military and came with their families. I felt included and comfortable. Theologically, the missionary was a much more "conservative" Christian than I was. But there was a certain simplicity and certainty about his brand of faith that seemed really appealing in a time in which I was full of anxiety. He and his wife were kind and accepting of my theological differences. I continue to have a lot of respect for him and the friends I made through that Bible Study.

A little less than a year after returning to Guam following my father's transplant- in September- six days after his 34th birthday, my brother Tim ended his life on the East End Beach in Portland. My mother called me at 4:30 in the morning, Guam time. Upon hearing the news, I think I went into a mild shock that lasted for a few weeks. Once again, my command sent me on emergency leave home, this time to Maine.

Losing Tim changed my life in a very drastic way, kind of like a tree branch that at a knob seems to take a sharp turn upward or to the right. It grows forever forward from there. The loss and grief were devastating. It was here that I began my story because it was here, in the dark, that I found and came to know the unwavering presence of God. It was in this grief that I

grew comfortable enough to get Really Mad at God. It was here that I learned an empathy and compassion- an appreciation- for every creature I had not before realized possible.

Grief is a long journey. I once described healing from the loss of your best friend as like losing your glasses, it's just so hard to find them without your glasses.

My tour in Guam ended about eight months after Tim's death. I was transferred to Virginia Beach- a location I had chosen because there was a non-denominational seminary close (and though there's not a lot of choice in the Navy, requesting its largest hub (Virginia Beach/Norfolk) gave me a pretty good shot at going there). In my effort to "win" at grieving- to feel like a whole person again as quickly as possible, I took every piece of advice offered. I journaled, I crafted, I screamed, I talked, and, I adopted an emotional support puppy. My father largely continued to be hospitalized through this time, so "Milojkai" (meaning "Gratitude for Grace") the corgi and I traveled to Chicago from Virginia as often as we could.

I think I'd always wanted a family of my own- deep down. But I was also content with the idea of being a really cool aunt. Losing Tim meant losing that option, as well as my most intimate relationship. A very strong desire for a family started to grow, alongside a still fervent call to military chaplaincy. This growing need in my heart caused my first questions about whether my whole plan (becoming a military chaplain) was really going to work out.

But I knew it could with the right partner. I knew I wanted two things: a Christian, and *not* a service-member. I ended up on a blind date with Alex, active-duty Navy, no religious affiliation. (God can be a real jokester.) About five months after beginning to date Alex, and about 7 years after realizing a call, I finally began seminary. The following week, I got the call that my father's time had come. He had fought bravely through so much pain but had declined to a point that he wanted to remove the machinery he needed to sustain life. I flew to Chicago, this

time leaving my support corgi with Alex, at home. I was able to be with my father as he transitioned into death.

I returned home to Virginia and transitioned from active-duty service to the Navy Reserves so that I could focus fully on seminary. Spiritually, this was a time of vivid exploration. Regent University, like the Bible Study I'd enjoyed, was theologically more conservative than I felt. But they'd advertised themselves as open to all, and I'd hoped I'd feel as comfortable there as I had with the Southern Baptists of Guam. I feel grateful to have had the opportunity to learn through a different perspective on our shared faith. While attending this "conservatively" Christian school, and deconstructing my own notions of the Divine, I was able to bounce my ideas off my boyfriend- who put no stock in the Divine whatsoever, but loved me a great deal. I felt I had a broad spectrum of perspective. There were many times I gave up. Many times I told God that if they wanted me to get through seminary, they were going to need to make it happen. They always did. It was a time in which I felt like I was floating in a rainbow of Christian spirituality, less certain of answers than ever, but with a faith truly deeper than it had ever been.

I began to embrace the Holy Mystery of the Divine, and even to begin to enjoy *not* having answers. I needed a faith community that was also willing to hold a certain amount of openness. I also needed my community to embrace all of creation, the way I believe Christ's love was meant to include all. I was disappointed by the United Methodist Church's stance on homosexuality. It seemed to me ambivalent rather than inclusive. As this feeling that I was not in the right denomination grew, I explored other churches. I found one online that stirred something in my heart. I visited Lynnhaven Colony Church UCC in Virginia Beach and loved it. I explored the tenants of the United Church of Christ. With a heavy but peacefully resolved heart, (as

changing denominations would restart my process toward endorsement for military chaplaincy) I knew I'd found my church home.

One other answer grew clear in my first year of seminary: Alex was to be my best friend forever. And (ok, a few things were clear) we wanted kids. He proposed August 1st, and we squished a wedding into his deployment schedule three months later, November 11th. We could either put my career aspirations first, or making our family first, but factoring in his deployment cycles and the natural limitations of the female reproductive system, we could not do both (first).

I had been visiting my mom and stepdad for a “pre- Christmas” in Maine but was scheduled to return to Virginia December 23rd (the day after Alex returned from a detachment operation in Nevada). I got snowed in and couldn't get home until the following day, Christmas Eve. I'd volunteered to be a reader at our church Christmas Eve service. My plane landed with about an hour to spare, and Alex picked me up. I insisted we give each other our gifts before we left for church. He didn't want to, because he saw the box I'd taken out of my bag- it looked just the right size for a watch or a bracelet (two things he'd hate) and he was dreading hurting my feelings. But I'm very stubborn. It took him a second to realize after opening it that it was a pregnancy test- reading “Positive”. That was the best Christmas Eve Ever, and we welcomed Paisley the following August.

Alex deployed ten days after her birth for three months. He returned home with a month to move our tiny family to his new duty station in Maine. We arrived just before Christmas in 2018. It took me most of a year to find my new church home; it was North Parish Congregational Church UCC in Sanford.

I had taken the months Alex was away off from seminary- which might seem like a no-brainer to some, given I had a newborn. But now eight years after realizing my call, all setbacks

and slow-downs felt like huge disappointments. Nevertheless, I was able to finish coursework online through 2019.

In September 2019, I began my last M.Div. degree requirement: CPE. I was so excited to finally have a chance to practice chaplaincy: to test the question: is this cool? Is this truly what God has been calling me toward?

I began to answer this at Havenwood Heritage Heights Continuing Care Retirement Community in Concord, NH, while I sewed Paisley a bumblebee costume for Halloween. And we found out that soon she would be a big sister.

Jonah arrived in a tough year, 2020. I officially graduated from seminary in May, on my couch, as all in-person events were shut down due to the Covid-19 pandemic. There was a lot of anger, frustration, and bitterness in our country. I stood, watermelon-esque in June, at Sanford's Black Lives Matter rally. Remembering the ugliness of that time, bringing to mind the ongoing hatred and violence, moves me to tears even now as I write. Jonah came in early July. His name honors the question raised by the Biblical book that bears it: can we love our enemies? (And the suggestion that perhaps we ought to try.)

Your word is a lamp to my feet, a light to my path (Ps. 119:105)

God has led me on a path that was never predictable, never boring, and that I would not describe as "easy". CPE confirmed for me that I love chaplaincy. However, Paisley, Jonah and even Alex (though our love has already been proven to endure distance) changed the intensity of the flame that burned within me to hop on the next convoy to Afghanistan to provide spiritual care. After being so frustrated in 2017 that the UCC would not endorse a chaplain for active-duty

military service until they had served at least three years in the Reserves, I'm now pretty excited to only serve part-time in these precious years of child rearing that move so fast. After being fairly certain I would make a terrible preacher, and fairly terrified of the tedium and nonsense that is an inevitable part of parish-ministry (budget meetings and big personalities), I found out I actually really like writing sermons and am enjoying getting better at delivering them. And church congregations can be so awesome that a little nonsense feels like just part of a still really good package.

Through my years of discernment, which I number in my heart at twelve while respectfully acknowledging in the books of the York Association they are 1.5, I have experienced the coming together of a very beautiful puzzle. I see my questioning nature, which for so long lead me to doubt my call to ministry, as one of my greatest assets. Open-mindedness and curiosity will help me to meet others where they are, without judgement, and to support them well with care. I see my enlistment in the Navy as not only the impetus for the realization of the call, but also as an invaluable experience of what people, especially people "at the bottom" of military and para-military organizations endure. The curveballs of life have slowly led me to the realization that I am following God's course, and not my own. I will never express gratitude for the loss of my brother, or for the suffering of my father, but the experiences gave me gifts of understanding and compassion that I am not only now able to share, but also now more greatly inspired to share in honor of their legacies.

What I've learned in all this is that I'm called, and equipped, to pastor. I seek to guide followers of Christ along their spiritual journeys, to support them in times of darkness and crisis, to rejoice with them in times of thanksgiving. I seek to be the invoker of the Spirit- the one who makes sure God is always invited to the party. I want to lead a flock in the directions that the

Holy Spirit guides. I am also called, and equipped, to serve as a chaplain. I seek to be the ear for the heartbroken, to offer first-aid to moral injury, to help meet the spiritual needs of any seeker no matter their faith. My journey has been complex, and I believe it's been the match to a call that is diverse.

PART II- THEOLOGY

THE UCC STATEMENT OF FAITH

We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, who is made known to us in Jesus our brother, and to whose deeds we testify:

God calls the worlds into being, creates humankind in the divine image, and sets before us the ways of life and death.

God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.

God judges all humanity and all nations by that will of righteousness declared through prophets and apostles.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, God has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the whole creation to its Creator.

God bestows upon us the Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.

God calls us into the church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be servants in the service of the whole human family, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ's baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.

God promises to all who trust in the gospel forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, the presence of the Holy Spirit in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in that kingdom which has no end.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto God. Amen

"We believe in God, the Eternal Spirit, who is made known to us in Jesus our brother, and to whose deeds we testify"

As I begin this conversation with the Statement of Faith of the United Church of Christ, I'd like to note that I'm using the version adapted by Robert Moss in 1976 to offer inclusive language. I believe God's being to transcend human gender, and while use of the pronoun "she"

is as accurate as “he” or even “it”, I try to avoid pronouns for the Divine altogether. I do this as a gesture of reverence for the supremacy of God.

I believe in God, YHWH, the God of Hebrew Scripture and the Christian Bible. This God is the Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer. It is a single God that has interacted with humankind in three distinct expressions. No part is greater than the others, or lesser. This God has existed forever and will continue to exist eternally.

I believe our language and conceptions of the Holy Creator will never fully, or even exactly accurately, describe the Divine Being. The power, nature, and wisdom of God will always remain above human understanding (*Phil 4:7*), however, as anyone who has ever loved another knows, total comprehension is not necessary for love or relationship. Our God exists in relationship to us, creation. Our God also exists outside this relationship, but we cannot. Without a relationship with the Divine, without spiritual connection, our spirits die as our bodies do. But once connected to God, aware of God’s presence and intentional in our living in that connection, our spirits do not die, but live eternally. I can not describe eternal life beyond this. I’m open to the concept of reincarnation (that a spirit that has passed out of one body at death may live again in a new being on earth), but do not believe it to be necessary or assured. I believe that when we live in relationship with God on earth, our spirit will continue to live in relationship with God- the omnipotent, omniscient, omnivivant (I did make this word up) Unifier- beyond our grave.

God calls the worlds into being, creates humankind in the divine image, and sets before us the ways of life and death.

God created the world- the universe and all its space and matter we have yet to discover. Did YHWH do this in the seven days of Genesis? Yes and No. I believe the truth of Genesis is in

its poetry. I believe God literally created our world, but that the process of creation is another example of the power of God that will eternally surpass human understanding. I'm not a scientist, and very honestly, the processes of evolution, quantum physics, biochemistry, - everything we've learned about "world building" so far- will never seem as important to me as the basic idea that ours is a Creator God. Our world and our race were not born out of a god's body being ripped apart or mind split open (as other ancient myths offer), but by an intentional desire that we exist. God created humankind, "And indeed it was **very** good." (*Gen 1:31*) Creation is holy, and we are a vital and wanted piece of this creation. We were born of love.

I believe the "divine image" is what I call the "divine spark". I don't believe God has toes, or a nose, but God has sentience. God is Spirit. This sentient spirit is within every human being. I believe *something* of the Spirit exists in all life- that the Spirit is itself life. I cannot look at the breathtaking complexity of a tree, or into the eyes of my corgi, and feel any other way. However, I believe there is something unique and particular to humanity alone, that we may be the image bearers alone. The image of God is not a shape, but a piece of God's spirit. It is what we call the "soul".

Abortion is not mentioned in Genesis (or anywhere in the Bible), but given the issues of our current culture, I'd like to share why I can only seek ordination in a faith that accepts abortion as a tragic part of reality, without judgement. I believe life to be holy, and human life to be sacred. I believe there is much Mystery yet to unravel about the complexity of the beginning of life, and that I don't know when that divine spark is truly imbued (though I have a theory based on my own experience), and **no one else knows yet either**. But I do know, that before that point of endowment, and before there is no longer any question as to the vitality of the being within a woman's body- there is a question. Before the point of endowment, a fetus is not a

human life, it is a fetus. It contains life, it has the potential for life, but it is not alive with the same sentient spark that the person carrying it has. It is the duty of our Christian Church, human and earthly, to care for the person alive. Abortion is part of healthcare, and that, I believe is a human right.

God seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin.

God's presence is eternal and steadfast. We often use the metaphor of a parent for God, I believe because this is generally the most patient form of love we mortals know, but God's love is not only patient, it is active. God loves each of us unconditionally. Through that love, God offers to us the experience of God- whether it be through Scripture, holy ritual, or personal experience. God often seeks us through other people. Sometimes God seeks us through people who have grown close to God and able to recognize Divine nudges ("something told me I needed to call you today..."), sometimes, I believe, God moves through people who are totally unaware. Continually, God seeks relationship with us. But though God's love is guaranteed and unconditional, relationship is not. Relationship requires that we take part. And relationship can be broken or even lost.

It serves God that we serve God because God loves us. It serves us that we serve God because God is Love. God, the Divine Parent, "wants what's best for us", wants us to choose God over what is temporary or evil. But God chooses to allow us to choose. I believe that's part of the sacredness of that 'divine spark'. We are able to choose to seek any idol of this world (money, fame, status, cool toys, etc.), and God will not stop us. But God will also never stop desiring that we put what is life-giving over what is life-draining. God never stops desiring a relationship with us.

God judges all humanity and all nations by that will of righteousness declared through prophets and apostles.

We can learn a lot about the nature of God through our holy scripture. In it, there are ancient stories of God, how YHWH and humanity have interacted through the last few millennia. These ancient stories were created in a certain time and place, certain cultures with certain languages. We continue to use words like “judgement” and “righteousness” that have been translated within those stories today, however, I’d like to recognize how much baggage these terms carry. If they were in a hotel lobby, they’d need a luggage cart (or five). I believe God does judge, but in the sense that God has perfect knowledge- perfect discernment. God knows our hearts, our intentions, our souls. YHWH discerns our efforts and our shortcomings. We are meant to live in relationship with our Creator and with one another. Relationships can have ups and downs. Service to that relationship is the “will of righteousness”. Righteousness, at its core, is a relational term. It described “doing right by ____” – that blank could be filled with oneself, one’s neighbor, creation, or YHWH, but it had to be filled in with *something*. Righteousness was never intended to survive in a vacuum. “No [hu]man is an island.” (John Donne) I believe that “all things work together for good for those who love God, called according to his purpose” (Rom 8:28). That is not to say, “everything happens for a reason”. What I believe the apostle Paul is explaining here is that like a fine wine, relationships with God get better with age. As long as we value and serve that connection- that love- we are doing the “right” thing. Relationship with God is never about perfection in any single moment, but the long-term commitment- through the good, bad, and ugly days. God will always know our heart.

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, God has come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death and reconciling the whole creation to its Creator.

Christmastime is my favorite time. But in a way- that's funny. It's like my saying that 2007 was my best year, though truly it was just a happy respite in a very dark time. Christmas is light in darkness. If you think about it- Easter *should* be the most joyous time for Christians, as it celebrates a true and eternal transformation. But ask 100 church goers their favorite holiday- my money is on Christmas!

Christmas is my favorite because it's a season in which we act just a little more like Christ taught us to act. With just a little more love, forgiveness a little more ready, kindness a little more important. Christ, fully human and fully Divine, came to earth just as any human would- helpless and likely adorable. As we all know, life is really hard. Anyone who has spent any time around newborns knows that they too already know this. But slowly, we learn how to cry less. We learn how to care for ourselves, and our strength grows. Sometimes we can grow so good at not crying that we forget its still Ok to cry. Life can be really hard and really painful. Our omniscient God, fully aware of "mortal coil", signed up for it willingly. That is what I believe to be the sacrifice of Christ, not so much his death, but his life.

I believe the life and death of Jesus Christ are theologically complicated. I do not believe any short versions give a nearly full enough explanation of why God became incarnate and suffered a humiliating death. Growing up, I was taught: God made people and they were good, but then they were bad, so they were punished. But then they were still bad because their parents had been bad. Eventually God needed to send himself as a singularly perfect person, so that he could have the snot beaten out of himself, and then people (who are still bad, but are Ok if they

admit they are bad) can go to heaven. With all my being, I hope to pass a different version on to Paisley, Jonah, and the world at large.

I don't believe Jesus was a whipping boy (I'm not a big subscriber to penal substitutionary atonement theory), but I do believe his manner of death was significant. I believe it is significant that he suffered. His death was fully his choice that he allowed. There is absolutely no room for the suggestion that he was caught by surprise, or that there was an unfortunate accident. It is important to me that Christ chose to undertake all aspects of life, even at their most excruciatingly painful. It is important to me to know that my God- a God of Presence and Relationship- not only abstractly knows human pain by their omniscient nature but has taken the time to prove this to me in a very public, very painful, act of suffering. My God has hung on earth, has allowed himself to be tortured so that I could know I never suffer alone.

But that's not all! The Messiah built a bridge toward a closer relationship to God for all humankind. I like to think of "atonement" as "At- One- Ment"- the unifying of the Divine and human as one. God chose Abraham, Israel, a single people (I believe the people who recognized a Creator God) through whom to begin this great history. The ways of Judaism were good, Hebrew Law loved and honored God, but this love, this relationship, needed to be opened to the world. Christ did "not come to abolish the Law and Prophets, but to fulfill them". (Matt 5:17) Christ was how the story, begun in Israel, was shared with all humankind.

Also, his teachings were pretty amazing. The Gospels are like the frosting if the Bible were a cupcake. They don't exactly make sense without the Hebrew Bible (the cake), but aren't they delicious? (Truly, I could eat frosting by itself – but a cupcake is so much more satisfying with a full bite.) Christ gave us a new Way. It was a new way to deepen the relationship that already existed.

God bestows upon us the Holy Spirit, creating and renewing the church of Jesus Christ, binding in covenant faithful people of all ages, tongues, and races.

The Holy Spirit to me is perhaps the most confusing, or at least the most Mysterious, aspect of the Holy Trinity. It is our Comforter, our Advocate. I believe the Holy Spirit, in a sense, is the bridge that Christ built. The life of Christ was a beginning, and as Christ was fully human, that beginning was short-lived. But as Christ was fully Divine, the transformation is eternal. As the human life of Christ died, the eternal one of the Holy Spirit began. (*John 16:7*) I use “began” to describe the point of transformation, as I might say a butterfly’s life “begins”. God has existed for eternity and neither Christ (what is fully Divine) nor the Holy Spirit were Creations, but expressions of One Eternal God.

As Christ ushered in the era in which the “good news” was shared fully beyond the Hebrew people, the “people of God” are no longer a single people or nation but are a Really Big Kingdom- one that transcends time, language and even politics. All believers are united in the Kingdom of God- a kingdom even more magical than Brigadoon because it has the courage and the power to remain, to live and transform. [Fun fact: my daughter’s name, Paisley, is the Scottish form of Paul’s Greek word for this Kingdom. - I think the Church, United in this Spirit, is a pretty cool thing.]

God calls us into the church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, to be servants in the service of the whole human family, to proclaim the gospel to all the world and resist the powers of evil, to share in Christ’s baptism and eat at his table, to join him in his passion and victory.

I believe in two holy rituals, “sacraments”, that serve to mark and define our relationship with God, and through that, our relationship as the Church. The first is baptism. I am not prepared to explain what change, if any, baptism causes within a soul. I believe the power of the sacrament is expressed within the church. I believe what is celebrated with baptism is the true and miraculous growth of the church. With baptism, we (as a people) grow. Through baptism, we- the church- are alive. Baptism is not necessary for God’s love, it is not necessary for eternal life. But it is necessary that the Church continues to recognize that it is one united people, glued in love through the Holy Spirit, and baptism is the way in which we recognize that and affirm our purpose. I support infant baptism because I believe this rite is more about the church than the individual.

The second sacrament through which we recognize our identity and relationship with God is communion. To me, communion is the celebration of God's presence. God's relationship with humanity began with the first human, the first being to have that sentient spark, and has continued and endured. Relatively recently (relative to the dawn of humanity), Christ was born among us, and that is a really big deal. The importance of Christ’s life and death simply can’t be overstated. Communion is the celebration of Christ’s life and sacrifice, the remembrance that God loves us so much, YHWH is willing to die with us.

And let me emphasize *us*. The sacrament of communion is an opportunity for us to unite our spirits with God as one, the whole of the people with the whole of God. Just as God’s love is not withheld from any person, this table should not be closed to any person. There should be no prerequisites for joining in the sacrament of communion. The simple desire to join is qualification enough.

God promises to all who trust in the gospel forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace, courage in the struggle for justice and peace, the presence of the Holy Spirit in trial and rejoicing, and eternal life in that kingdom which has no end.

The Kingdom of God is open to all. We “all have sinned and fall short” (*Rom 3:23*), and Christ “did not come to call the righteous but sinners”. (*Matt 9:12/Luke 5:32*) We all deserve love and forgiveness from one another, we are all called to be a community for one another within the church. God’s is a restorative justice rather than punitive. It is this restorative brand of justice that enables a community to thrive rather than shrivel or tear itself apart. God is forever seeking that love and goodness grow, that we treat ourselves and creation *better, more* justly. And as we continue to live and think and try, there will be times we fail and make mistakes. But the power of the gospel is that it makes relationship with the Creator possible. And through that relationship, we learn how to forgive ourselves and others.

Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto God. Amen

My ordination, my work, my life is not for me. Me would have quit a long time ago. It’s always been for and through God. The papers that somehow appeared through my fingertips, the sermons that struck chords, the question that opened someone’s heart, all those things happened by the power and grace of the Holy Spirit. I seek to be a conduit for the Holy Almighty, and I pray that it is always God’s will I enact and never my own. (*Amen*)

PART III- WHY UCC

No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.

The first United Church of Christ church service I attended opened with these words. And so did the second and third, because the church opened every service this way. Then I found out a great many UCC churches use this message, because it's a motto of the national church. But it made an impact on me that morning. I thought, "Yes. These are words that should start a gathering in Christ's name."

In Part I, I explained that I initially found the UCC because of dissatisfaction with the UMC. LGBTQ equality is extremely important to me. I believe the Christian Church has inflicted a tremendous amount of pain on queer persons, and though not *all* denominations have been perpetrators to the same degree, we all use the symbol of the cross. In the 21st century, we need more than "tolerance" in our faith communities, we need even more than "acceptance". I believe we need "Extravagant Welcome".

It was the UCC's proclamation of Extravagant Welcome that first moved me to say, "I think I'm home." The United Church of Christ is passionate about inclusion. While respecting the autonomy of its local congregations, many have chosen to become Open and Affirming. Many promote Accessibility and recognize the need to modify buildings and services to include those with disabilities. Many are now "WISE" congregations and promote the inclusion and understanding of persons with mental health issues. This is what a church that follows in the ways of Christ does.

History and Mystery

The short version of the story of the United Church of Christ goes: the UCC was formed in 1957 through the union of the Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church. The CCC had been formed by the union of the Congregational Church and the Christian Church (1931) and the ERC from the Evangelical Synod of North America and the German Reformed Church (1934). Thus, the formation of the United Church of Christ was like the convergence of four streams.

The Four Tradition Origin Story is a helpful introduction to the history of the UCC, and points to the truth of our church's complicated and diverse background. Today we have a church in which we can still see the congregational autonomy (with self-governance), individualism, ecumenism, social mindedness, and lay empowerment that were contributed as hallmarks of the four bodies that began to gel in the 1930s.

Of course, history is never quite so simple, each story is woven into so many others like a most epic tapestry. The Church has never existed within a bubble, but has been expressed through human cultures since Abraham, or perhaps even Adam. The story of our Messiah would have been much different, so too the ministry of Paul, in a political system and climate other than that of first century Rome. Likewise, the Protestant peoples of Europe and then America were greatly influenced, if not partially formed, by the politics and cultural ethos of the times in which they lived. Ours is a story of monarchical tyranny and persecution, war torn homelands, poverty, refugeeism as well as colonialism, slavery, starvation and nation building. There are triumphs in this tale, and dark moments, much like the history of America. But there is a unique idea that exists in the United Church of Christ that I believe can be seen throughout our history. It's an idea that may have existed comfortably in the European and American cultures of our

predecessors but has always been taken one step further within the pre-UCC bodies of believers. What sets the UCC apart, and has throughout its history, is the primacy of *covenant*.

Covenants were not invented by the UCC. They are a key theme of the Hebrew Bible and can be found today within Judaism, Catholicism, and all Protestant denominations that I know of. The difference of their use within the UCC is in **how important they are** to us. Our government is formed in covenant, our church bodies are formed in covenant, our missions and commitments- all out of covenant. There is this idea that *we each do our part* in service to each other and for the greater service to God. This means every member of our church is in covenant, every member is a valued part of our whole. The UCC is not hierarchical but is a body for and by followers of Christ. This priority placed upon mutuality, respect and commitment is what makes the UCC special. This is what makes the UCC the creative, vibrant, dynamic church it is today. It is this quality that invites openness and gives the church its strength to embrace Holy Mystery. I believe it is our ideal of covenant that will allow us to adapt to the changing landscape of worship in the future.

Just Peace Like Four Rivers

Let me begin this section by stating explicitly that I am seeking ordination in the United Church of Christ because I think it's the best denomination there is.

But I have a small tweak.

Philosophically, I agree with the pacifism that has been a mark of the church throughout its history and into our modern era. Morally, I oppose war and support the pronouncement affirming the UCC as a Just Peace Church of General Synod 15. However, there is a cultural

effect of this opposition to “the institution of war” that is not doing the church or the people of its nation any favors.

In Part I, I shared that I joined the military for reasons that weren’t exactly clear to me at the time. I did feel that inward nudge, I do believe I was being led towards God’s path, but there’s a little more to the story of what was going on at the time. In 2007, folx at home in America were rocked by the Abu Ghraib prison scandal. American service-members- barely old enough to not be called “kids”- were torturing, brutalizing, humiliating inmates of the military prison. The behavior was disgusting, the stories were shocking. I was furious but had the vague sense that I was not furious at “them” (the young prison guards), but “us”- the country that had military members that did this. I marched on Washington. I protested for the shutdown of the Guantanamo Bay military prison. But then I realized that perhaps the best way to effect change was not in a tearing apart, but through a coming together. So, I joined the military with a very naïve idealistic hope that I might be able to change, in some small way, the culture that had made monsters.

In 2010 I was better able to articulate my call to military chaplaincy. I spent another decade in the service seeking out every Chaplain I could find. I did not come across a single UCC chaplain, even in Norfolk VA- the largest Naval base in the world. The UCC is not present for its military members. Like many service-members, I faced high stress and isolation. I deployed. I experienced personal loss. I went through the most painful period of my life, and was desperate for ANY version of God I could get. All that was available to me was conservative Baptist. Their theology of suffering is not something I would offer those grieving, or really with anyone. The UCC has a heart that can hold the hurt so much more helpfully. And I want that for any member of our military, as I would for any person who needs it.

As a church, let us oppose war, but not those who fight them. Our military is people, many of them 18-year-old kids, and they need to know they are loved. We need to do more bridge building. I understand now my laughable Pollyannaism in joining the Navy (at the bottom) to change it, however, the fundamental idea is sound. We don't change our enemies through hate- we change them through love. The only way we may end war is by sitting with it, growing our own understanding- joining with the military to better understand what it is and why it is, so that it may understand the Just Peace of the UCC. My hope for the UCC is that it may join with the military by promoting the Chaplain Corps, reexamining and streamlining their endorsement process and meeting with Joint Chiefs and other policy makers. I believe in peace, but I also believe our lack of presence in the armed services hurts our church and the people who need us.

May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. (Ps 19:14)

The United Church of Christ is a church of Extravagant Welcome, of Inclusion, of Justice, Respect and Commitment to one another and God. It has a history rich in social justice work, rich in victories for goodness and love. I pray that it may continue to meet the needs of the people it serves. As more and more churches close their doors, I pray that the Holy Spirit will guide us in the ways of worship and love that are right for the coming era. As I walk along my journey of faith and purpose, weaving my little thread within a greater tapestry, I thank you, Reader, for joining me here. I have appreciated all who have shaped me and guided me, and all who I have yet to meet on this path. Thank you, and may God bless you. *Amen*