

## *Spiritual Pilgrimage*

I grew up going to a large Baptist Church in Oxnard, California. We attended church just about every time they opened the doors: Sunday mornings and evenings, Wednesday evenings, and many other activities. I had a very conservative upbringing; I didn't hear a woman preach until I was in my twenties, and it was considered sinful to drink alcohol or watch certain movies. We were fairly convinced that Catholics weren't *real* Christians and praying a prayer to ask Jesus into your heart was the only way to be forgiven of your sins and go to heaven when you die. I was a very curious kid with lots of questions about God, but questions weren't really a part of the church culture of my childhood. While I never fully rejected the spirituality of my childhood, I never fully embraced it, either.

When I was thirteen years old, my family moved to Waterloo, Belgium because of my father's work. We lived there for four and a half years, and I loved it. My friends were from all over the world, we traveled, and I had a largely carefree adolescence. We went to an international Baptist church in Brussels, but very American in style. I remember long sermons, long Sunday school classes and long car rides to get to church. When I went to college, I never went to church.

When I was twenty-one, the summer between my junior and senior years of college, I decided to work at a Christian camp. I was tired of the nonstop party life of college, and I felt like I needed a change. During the first week of staff training, while receiving Eucharist, I had a mystical experience which changed everything for me. I suddenly – and mysteriously - became aware that God *liked* me, not just loved me, and that experience of unexpected affection changed how I viewed God and how I viewed myself; I went from believing I needed to perform to earn

God's love to understanding that God loves me for free. I now see my conversion as an ongoing process. My experience of following Jesus is about waking up more and more to his way of living and being with God, with myself, and with others. I like what Richard Rohr writes about faith and mystery: "Mystery is not something you can't know. Mystery is endless knowability. Living inside such endless knowability is finally a comfort, a foundation of ultimate support, security, unrestricted love, and eternal care. For all of us, it takes much of our life to get there; it is what we surely mean by "growing" in faith." This understanding of God has led me to an ever-expanding and inclusive view of God and humanity. From my conservative upbringing where only men led and preached, I now believe all are called to participate in all aspects of the life of the church, regardless of gender identity/expression or sexual orientation.

While my view of God and humanity has expanded, what I'm *certain* of has grown quite small: 1. *God is Christlike*; 2. *God exists as a mutually submissive community (Creator/Redeemer/Spirit)*; 3. *God is love*; 4. *God is always at work, making all things new.*

### ***Pastoral Calling/Ordained Ministry***

I have been in pastoral ministry since 1995, serving in seven churches and four denominations. For most of that time, I've served in churches that do not require formal ordination credentials. I've worked at non-denominational and Baptist churches which locally license or ordain its pastors. I was ordained to Word and Sacrament in the Evangelical Covenant Church in June 2018. I have experienced deep levels of satisfaction alongside painful seasons of loss. My pastoral identity has emerged gradually over those years, from an energetic youth pastor in my twenties and thirties, to a church planter in my forties, and most recently Co-Lead Minister at Wayzata Community Church (*United Church of Christ*) at age fifty-one.

I am at my best personally when I create environments where people with questions and doubts can engage honestly with God, Christianity, and the church. I experiment with new ways of doing old things, and I love developing leaders to serve God according to the gifts they were given. I love collaborating with teams, shared leadership models, preaching, and helping people understand where they are as they progress through the stages of faith.

I understand my call to ordained ministry as a call to love and serve a local congregation by offering the sacraments through worship, walking with people through life's celebrations and losses, offering spiritual guidance, pastoral care as we follow Jesus together. This call extends to all people, regardless of race, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, class, or creed.

During my ordination process into the *Evangelical Covenant Church*, we were invited to reflect on four unique areas of pastoral calling: Preach well, teach well, lead well, and care well. While not comprehensive, I still think these four offer a good framework for ordained ministers to monitor their own excellence in calling.

**Preach well.** I have come to see preaching as the guided intersection of three paths: the bible, my honest journey with God, and the listener's honest journey with God. I don't see preaching as primarily imparting information to people (though it sometimes includes that). I see the art of preaching as the creation of a dynamic intersection where a collision of those three paths might happen. I do not know what the "collision" will be for each person, or for our congregation, but I believe preaching can somehow be transformative and generative. Great preaching is empowered by the Holy Spirit, and it flows out of a reverence for the bible and a willingness to wrestle with it, and it results in invitations for life change that are received and acted upon.

**Teach well.** I see teaching as different from preaching in that it is more informative in nature. Children and adults need to be taught the overall story of God found in the Scriptures. Engaged couples need to be taught how to prepare for a good marriage. Bible studies are necessary to discover the unique context and original intent of the writer. While I believe I am a more gifted preacher than a teacher, I find great joy in discovering good teachers in our congregation, training them, and giving them opportunities to use their gifts to build up the church.

**Lead well.** The most concise definition of spiritual leadership I've heard is from Ruth Haley Barton: To *discern* and *do* the will of God in our congregation. Discernment starts with a well-defined question: What unique calling has God given us as a church? Then we follow a process of praying, talking, questioning, and eventually deciding on what specific goals, actions, or projects we are being called by God to do. After that process, we begin the process of strategic planning – how will we do what God has called us to do? Discernment must precede strategic planning.

**Care well.** A pastor cares well for his or her congregation when he or she sets up a system where gifted, trained caregivers walk alongside people who are struggling, suffering, and in need. Caring for someone well does not always mean alleviating his or her suffering. Rather, it means walking alongside them, giving hope and practical help so that they can pursue the healing and wholeness that they need.

Church ministry itself (at least in the United States) has changed radically over the last decade; fewer people are attending church and what it means to be a Christian has largely been politicized and polarized. The church needs to adapt to address these changes in culture, and it

won't be easy. However, I sense these overall themes need to be addressed: (1) Less concern over church attendance and more concern about how we're engaging the community in which we exist; (2) Less concern over "what we believe" and more concern about how we practice the love and compassion of Jesus in our spheres of influence; and (3) Less concern about the line between clergy and laity and more concern about how we empower all people to envision themselves as ministers of grace and peace within their jobs/roles/systems.

### ***Theological Perspective***

#### **God as Trinity**

In the fourth century, the Cappadocian fathers used the Greek word *perichoresis* to describe the nature of God in relationship. Perichoresis is compound word, pairing together the words *choresis* (meaning dance or movement) and *peri* (meaning around). *Perichoresis* describes the Creator, Son, and Spirit (1) in relationship; and (2) constantly moving in and through one another. The Trinity exists as an eternally moving, dynamic *dance*. God has a *life in relationship* (shown most clearly in John 14) into which God invites us to participate.

The Trinity is seen first in Genesis 1, where all three members of the Trinity seem to be present. The Spirit is hovers over the waters, the Word (the Son) speaks life into existence, and the Creator initiates the creating.

The writer of the gospel of Mark seems to mention all three members of the Trinity at the baptism of Jesus in Mark 1:10: "*And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."* Jesus is present as the incarnated Son, the Spirit is hovering over the waters, and the Father speaks. Mark seems to be

intentionally echoing the creation account, hinting at a new creation happening in the baptism of Jesus.

We see the Trinity in the gospels: The Creator sends the Son into the world with the birth of Jesus (Luke 2). The Spirit sends Jesus into the wilderness (Luke 4). Later, Jesus asks the Creator to send the Spirit to be with his followers after his ascension (John 14). Jesus provides a way for human beings to be swept up into the Trinity with his death, resurrection, and ascension.

The Trinity is the dynamic flow from which the church began, is strengthened to do God's work in the world, and to which we will one day be gathered back together. The Creator continually creates. The Spirit continually guides us into all truth, empowers us to do what we could never do on our own, gives gifts to the world *through* the church. The Son shows us who God is and gives us a pattern of living that allows us to partner with God in bringing the Kingdom of God to earth here and now.

## **The Bible**

As a child, I was taught that the Bible was the inerrant Word of God and that every story within it was literally true. I no longer see the Bible that way. After studying with a Jewish Rabbi for over ten years, I now see the Bible through the lens of midrash: a kind of study that assumes “the Word of God” is the beginning of a conversation in which we can still engage (this is another way of saying that “God is still speaking”). Midrash assumes that the contradictions in the Bible are there on purpose – therefore, we should question and interrogate it so we can find hidden meanings within the Bible. It is purposefully written with mystery, with hints and clues so that people will go on a journey together. Midrash involves four layers, and each layer goes deeper, like an onion.

- **Peshat:** *Surface, plain, or simple.* This is where we deal with the straightforward details of a verse - places, events, chronology.
- **Remez:** *Hint.* This is where we look beneath and beyond the surface, where we look for connections between passages. This is also where we begin to look for allegorical interpretations and meanings.
- **Darash:** *To seek/Inquire.* This is where we get the term *midrash*. In this layer, we go beyond what is immediately apparent and we begin to wonder why things are happening. Using imagination, we begin to fill in what seems to be missing in order to find a deeper meaning.
- **Sod:** *Secret/mystery.* This layer is given by inspiration, through mystical encounter with the Divine.

Using midrash, we use our imagination, we can find multiple meanings within each Scripture, and we can read contemporary problems and concerns into the story.

The Bible is a library of books which tell the story of God's covenantal relationship with God's people, from Israel to Jesus to the church. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible is written in the languages of its particular people, with nuances that are not readily understood when read in English in the twenty-first century. It was written over several thousand years and it reflects those cultures from which it emerged, which makes it difficult to understand centuries later. If the Bible were written as a set of concrete axioms alongside timeless prohibitions and allowances, perhaps understanding it would be easier. Because the Bible was written down as a winding narrative of God's people following and failing to follow God across several thousand years, the answers to our questions are not always clear. Faithful Christians disagree – strongly - on what kinds of answers the bible gives. Given the many lenses through which the bible was

written and continues to be understood, the question quickly becomes *how* we are to understand what God might be saying to us through the Bible.

The Bible can be seen as a progressive revelation of who God is. It tells the story of how communities of people understood God at particular places and in particular times, and how that understanding evolves and changes over time. For example, in 1 Samuel 15:2-3, God is portrayed as the *kind of God* who commanded the slaughter of men, women and children. By the time we get to Jesus, God is portrayed as a compassionate Father who refuses to punish a wayward son (Luke 15). We can see how humanity's understanding of God grows and expands through time. I love what Rabbi Sandy Sasso says about the Bible: it contains true stories *and* truth stories: a story doesn't have to be literally true to contain great truth.

### **The Kingdom of God**

The Kingdom of God is not simply heaven when we die, and it is not inaccessible until we die. It is directly accessible – right here and now. I have always liked Dallas Willard's simple description of the Kingdom of God: "*The Kingdom of God is God reigning. It is present wherever what God wants done is done. It is the range of God's effective will.*"

Willard also talked about the *Kingdom of Me and You* (which is present wherever what I want done is done; what I can do or control, directly or indirectly). Our invitation as Christians is to bring our kingdoms more and more in line with God's Kingdom.

And yet, God's Kingdom confounds those who try hard to earn it (see the older son in Luke 15). It is not reserved for only one people group (see the Roman Centurion in Matthew 8). It is not reserved for those who have lived righteous lives or who have been responsible (see the woman caught in adultery in John 8). It is not even reserved for those who could theologically



make any sense of this paragraph (see the demoniac in Mark 5). It flows to – and *through* – anyone who wants to partner with God to get what God wants done, done (justice, restoration, renewal). It's about taking care of orphans and widows, loving our enemies, and learning to practice the Sabbath. It's about forgiveness and inner healing. It's freeing sex slaves. It's stopping the cycle of violence at the systemic level. It's ending systemic racism. And its tables full of friends who share meals and their hearts with each other.

## **Jesus**

Jesus the Christ is the unique incarnation of God, the image of God in human form, who universally holds all things together (Colossians 1:15). Jesus was fully human yet fully divine in every way. Through his life, death, and resurrection, we are made right with God. Through his teachings, we are given a way to live that allows us to come into alignment with God's Kingdom here on earth. Jesus the Christ sits at the right hand of the Father and has been given authority over all things. Through his resurrection, we will also be resurrected after death, and take our place with God eternally.

## **Humanity, Sin, and Redemption**

Understanding the atonement is like trying to describe a gem that has many facets. A theology of atonement attempts to describe how it is that we are made right with God, and what role Jesus' death on the cross plays in making us right.

The early church fathers believed in the *Christus Victor* view of atonement, which proposed that Satan has power over humans, and that Christ delivers us from Satan's power by delivering a ransom through his death on the cross. This was the view held by Irenaeus and

Augustine. In this view, Christ prevailed partly by tricking Satan by ransoming us through presenting himself to Satan, then breaking out of the bonds that Satan thought would hold him.

The *Satisfaction View* emerged later, primarily as an answer to the problems that arose from the *Christus Victor* view, which seemed to give Satan too much power, and painted God to be a trickster. The *Satisfaction View* (also called the *Penal Substitutionary View*) strongly influenced Catholic and Protestant/Evangelical theology in the west. In this view, the only response that an all-Holy God can have to sin is wrath, which must be satisfied through death. Jesus' death on the cross is seen to satisfy God's wrath, because Jesus acted as the substitution for sinners. Sinners are reconciled to God because Jesus took on God's wrath through his death, but defeated death through his resurrection. Anselm held this view, and so did Luther and Calvin.

The *Moral Example/Demonstration* view emerged next, as a response to the problem that the Satisfaction view posed: it painted God out to be uncreative and overly punitive. Abelard suggested that God could forgive without requiring satisfaction. The cross demonstrates the love of God, which saves us by showing us how much God loves us, thus drawing us back to him.

I like Scot McKnight's view that atonement theories can be seen somewhat like golf clubs – the nine iron is useful at times, but you don't want to use it for the entire round. I tend to personally resonate most with the Moral Example/Demonstration view, because of its focus' Jesus' work on the cross as demonstrating the extent to which God was willing to go to forgive versus God needing to punish someone to satisfy his wrath. I have the most problem with the Penal Substitutionary view. P.P. Waldenstrom was a Swedish theologian in the 19<sup>th</sup> century who suggested that the Bible *never* says that God's justice demands punishment for sin to be forgiven. The debt of sin can be forgiven, Waldenstrom said, but not repaid. Waldenstrom came up with

these beliefs about the atonement: (1) The fall of humanity into sin occasioned no change in the disposition of God; (2) It was neither God's wrath nor vindictiveness toward us after the fall that blocked the way of salvation; (3) The change brought about by our fall into sin occurred only in humanity, in the sense that we became sinful and therefore separated from God; (4) We therefore needed reconciliation but not for the purpose of appeasing God's wrath in order to render God merciful; rather to blot out and take away our sin so as to render us righteous again; (5) Jesus Christ accomplished this reconciliation.

### **The Holy Spirit and the Church**

The Holy Spirit is a fully participating member of the Trinity, sent to the body of Christ by the Creator. The Holy Spirit places a desire in human beings to turn toward God, convicts them of sin, and gives assurance that God forgives them when they do. The Holy Spirit nurtures a sense of unity in the body of Christ, calling people back together who have been estranged, and calling the church to be on mission together in the world. The Holy Spirit cultivates the character of an individual over the course of a lifetime, leading them towards maturity in the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-25). The Holy spirit leads the church into unity.

The Holy Spirit leads and directs groups of people as well as individuals, when they demonstrate a desire to follow Christ and to be led by God's Spirit. The Holy Spirit illuminates the hearts and minds of those who read the Scriptures, so that they can become transformed in their inmost being. The Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts to the church through individuals: some prophets, some evangelists, some shepherds, some apostles, and some teachers. People do not "own" these gifts, they flow through individuals so that God can bring about the new thing that God wants to bring about in the world (Isaiah 43:19).

The Holy Spirit guides the church in understanding God's heart for the world through the Scriptures, in every unique time and culture. The Holy Spirit gives dynamic life and energy to preaching and to the sacraments when communities of faith gather. The church must be consciously dependent on the work of the Holy Spirit to fulfill its mission in the world.

## **Sacraments**

Jesus instituted two sacraments: Holy Communion and Baptism. Through the waters of Baptism - whether infant or adult - we are embraced by God, included in the Universal (and local) Church, and enfolded into the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Through Holy Communion, we experience the real presence of Christ through an ordinary meal of bread and wine. We remember the death and resurrection of Christ, and we also remember that our unity comes not from creeds but from our common devotion to Christ.

The mysterious grace of God is made tangible through ordinary means. This is most obvious through the sacraments of Baptism and the Holy Communion, but it is also possible to live sacramental *lives*. When we choose to offer up our ordinary gifts for the sake of others – a meal around a table, a listening ear, or the chance for young parents a night out – we also make tangible the mysterious grace of God. As a pastor, I hope I model this, and help others live their lives in this way as well.

## **Theodicy**

At a previous church, I met Matt and Danika and their three-year old daughter Sloan, who has a very rare brain tumor. Their life has been a roller coaster of grief, hope, pain, joy, and patience. One day I visited them in the hospital and Sloan was not doing very well. I prayed with them, I sat with them, I asked them questions. When parents are watching their children suffer,

there are no words. There is prayer and companionship, but I have learned not to give clichés of false hope. I do not know how long Sloan will live. My heart breaks thinking about life without her. I told Matt and Danika that God is with them in their suffering, in their pain, in their tears, and in their hoping. I told them God is on their side as they mourn. I cried with them.

My wife Mary and I experienced seven years of infertility, a unique kind of silent suffering that most people don't understand and aren't aware of. During those roller coaster years of hoping and having our hopes dashed, we felt exhausted, over exposed, defective, sometimes angry, and sometimes numb. We know what it's like to hear bad clichés. We know what it's like to sit with someone who is trying hard to fix a problem that they can't fix. We also know what it's like to sit with someone who just sits with us in our pain without trying to answer for God or fix our problems. I can't answer why their suffering is happening, why (or whether) God is allowing it, or when it will end. But I can sit with them.

### ***Self-Care and Spiritual Practices***

I see a spiritual director once a month. I start most days with centering prayer and silence. We have our best friends to our house every Sunday night to share a meal and rich conversation. I meet with a few other pastors regularly to encourage each other, pray for each other, and be transparent about our struggles. I take Fridays and Saturdays off. I take all my vacation. I exercise 4 or 5 times a week.

### ***Ethics and Boundaries***

**Protection of children.** When I was a youth pastor, one of our volunteer leaders told me that she had hit her child. She was in a conflicted relationship with her husband, she was exhausted, and she was venting. She wasn't asking for help; she was blowing off steam. And yet,

she told us she had hit her child. I knew that I was bound by law to report this to social services, and so I did. I first explained to her why I couldn't keep that confidential, and she was very hurt. And yet, it was important that I did this.

Protecting children also means setting up clear guidelines and structures for our children's volunteers and going through appropriate trainings regularly. Staff and volunteers should all be required to go through training, get background checks, and never be alone with a child one-on-one.

**Confidentiality.** When I meet with people and I sense that they need to tell me something that potentially involves abuse, or self-harm, I tell them that I will keep everything they tell me confidential, except if they tell me that they are being abused, that they are abusing someone, or that they are going to harm themselves. In all other matters, I ensure people that meet with me that what they say to me will be held in confidence. I never share stories or conversations with people, in sermons or otherwise, without their permission.

**Appropriate Touch.** It is always appropriate to ask for consent when hugging, placing a hand on a shoulder, even shaking hands, and to respect any person's personal decisions around what they are and are not comfortable with.

**Dual Relationships & Power Dynamics.** In pastoral ministry, the lines between clergy and friendship can get ambiguous. It's essential for clergy to have a support system outside of one's congregation. Sacred trust is given when spiritual guidance is offered, and when that trust is broken, the pain is greater than if it were from simply a friendship. An appropriate understanding of the power imbalance between clergy and laity is crucial when providing pastoral care for a parishioner.

**Sexual misconduct.** I am a heterosexual, cisgendered male. Throughout my twenty-seven years in pastoral ministry, I have always believed in the transformational power of men and women working alongside each other. I have led women, women have led me, and I have served alongside women as peers. When men and women work together in ministry, we have a more complete picture of who God is.

I have occasionally experienced the “spark of attraction” that happens when working alongside women. When I become aware that I am attracted to someone who is not my wife, I tell someone I trust about it. I try to become aware of the ways in which I might unconsciously be seeking that person out, and I set boundaries around how I spend time with them. Admittedly, there is a very difficult tension to hold here. Some men in ministry so distance themselves from women that they create formal and informal “men only” inner circles, where decision-making is confined to men only. The result is that women feel invisible, devalued, and left out. My personal conviction is that men and women can work together closely in ministry, while keeping a high degree of integrity. What it requires of us is a ruthless honesty with ourselves when we feel that “spark of attraction” starting to happen, and to take the necessary steps to keep those relationships healthy. In my current ministry position, I am a Co-lead minister alongside a woman, and we are flourishing in our partnership together.

### ***Justice***

I grew up in Ventura County in southern California, which was very ethnically diverse in the 1970’s. Even in my small, private, church school class of 25 kids, there were Asians, African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Caucasians. At the age of 13, my family moved to Waterloo, Belgium, where I attended a school that boasted 700 students from 55 countries. When

I was 17, we moved to Minnesota, where I attended a suburban high school that was almost entirely white. The college I attended was almost entirely white. The churches in which I have served for 27 years have been almost entirely white.

A few years ago, I was having lunch with my friend Dee, an African American church planter. When I casually told Dee about an idea I had about writing and teaching about the Exodus, she interrupted me. *“Please,” she said, “Tell me that you’re not going to be another white pastor who sees his white congregation as Israel rather than Egypt in the Exodus story.”* Dee is a good friend, and I am so glad she raised the alarm. Though it honestly made immediate sense to me, I would not have necessarily seen my tendency to not see myself as Egypt had she not confronted me. Because of Dee (and other friends of color), I have a perspective now that allows to me begin to see some of the ways in which power and privilege have shaped how I’ve read the Bible, interacted with people, and unconsciously added to the problems of people of color.

I am a white, educated, cisgender, heterosexual upper-middle class male. I can almost always situate myself in places where I am among other white, educated, upper middle-class people. I can almost always find people that look like me in positions of power, on the covers of magazines, in the movies and television shows that I watch, in the books that I read, and around my own kitchen table.

At a church planter training many years ago, about forty of us gathered for a concert of prayer. Of those forty church planters, between one third and one half were people of color. The worship leaders were people of color. I wept during that hour - partly because I experienced a God that was qualitatively bigger and more beautiful than I experience when I’m only with



people who look like me – and partly because I had missed out on that diversity for most of my life.

I've been challenged to look for experiences and relationships that help me to experience the richness of God through the diversity of the body of Christ. Therefore, I am making conscious choices to place myself in situations where I am among people of color, and where I am not the leader.

In 2019, the leadership of Genesis (the church that I planted in 2014) through a yearlong process that resulted in becoming open and affirming within a denomination (the Evangelical Covenant Church) that doesn't allow clergy to perform same-sex weddings, allow openly gay clergy to be ordained, or allow LGBTTQIA+ folks to be hired on staff. The process included a series of conversations, listening circles, sermons, and discussions to determine our stance on LGBTQIA+ inclusion. After that process was completed, the members of the church overwhelmingly voted (by a 92% majority) to allow clergy to perform same-sex weddings and to hire qualified LGBTQIA+ candidates for any open staff positions.

I love it when the church throws open its doors to welcome those who have been excluded and marginalized. I love helping people discover and rediscover the goodness of their own humanity. I love it when the church helps people discover surprising new beginnings. I love seeing staff and lay leaders come together to achieve a compelling vision.

From the beginning, God created *all people* in God's image, calling them to care for creation, and for their children (Genesis 1:26-28; 5:1-2). Though God is primarily thought of as Father (a good metaphor), God is not gendered; God is spirit (John 4:24). God is also referred to in the Bible as a mother hen, a festering sore, and a strong tower, none of which contradicts God

as Spirit. Rather, the Bible shows God's graciousness in expressing who God is through many ways, so that we might understand God more.

When sin entered the world, the curse also entered the world (Genesis 3), and from the curse flowed patriarchy, hierarchy between men and women, and disunity. When Jesus came to break the curse and bring with him the imminent Kingdom of God, he reintroduced unity and community among men and women. He spoke to women, women numbered among his disciples, and he even taught a parable that showed the God character as a woman (the woman sweeping, in Luke 15). In Christ, we are a new creation, an identity that describes individuals as well as the church. In this new creation, the curse is broken and the original relationship between all people is restored: united, co-laborers, and co-leaders of creation.