

Let the Same Mind that was in Christ Jesus be in You Phil 2:1-8; Lk 4:16-24

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church, UCC, Camden, February 16, 2020

February 20th will mark the 20th anniversary of my ordination which followed on the heels of two years as a licensed minister. It was a day that I still look back on with gratitude and remember the spirit of shared celebration and inspiration. I remember from the service that my friend and colleague, Bryan Sirchio, sang a song he wrote based on a statement by Frederick Buechner: “Vocation is the place where our deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.” There is such a place for all of us, drawing on our diverse gifts for the sake of the whole. Since childhood, I felt drawn to the role of the pastor without having words for it. Having grown up female in a tradition that does not ordain women, it took the care and vision of others years later to help me re-identify that serving as a pastor is where “my deep gladness meets the world’s deep need.”

To be ordained one’s own community of faith has to sense and affirm a call to ministry in a person who also senses and affirms that call. What follows is a complex process including studies, exams, discernment processes and practicums, the search process for a pastorate and finally the actual invitation by a local church to become its pastor. Then comes ordination. By the time Community of Hope, UCC, in Madison called me as their pastor, wonderful faithful people, lay and ordained, had been sharing their own God given love, experience, and commitments and had shepherded me to this point. While graduate school taught me mostly theoretical knowledge, it was God’s Spirit and the faithful people of the church who were the source of my formation as a pastor. The people of Community of Hope lovingly took me in as a rookie though they had sworn to themselves not to call someone who was inexperienced. I wouldn’t be here today without them and without you!

I still remember how Jane Buffet, my first moderator, took me under her wings. She was something of a Den Mother to the whole congregation, including me. She was a saint, that is, God’s light was truly shining through her. She had lost her adopted daughter to suicide. She had not become bitter but let her broken-open heart only grew bigger in compassion for countless people who were hurting. Jane knew that suffering is an inevitable part of life and trusted that God was there with her no matter what happened. Jane had been a labor contract mediation lawyer, often working into the middle of the night to help two groups (employer and employees)

build a bridge toward each other that felt fair to everyone. Then Jane became ill with multiple myeloma (blood cancer) in her late fifties. She had to slow down and her cancer went into remission thanks to a life-saving bone marrow transplant. We met shortly after that and Jane decided to serve as moderator during my first year.

Her wisdom and humor were priceless as she watched me start out as a whirlwind. I suspect she saw something of her younger self in me. I will always remember how, after about 8-12 months she took me out to lunch and took out a ball point pen right there in the crowded restaurant. Then she proceeded to write a large letter **D** on her forehead. Jane said: “Ute, can you see that? **D** stands for ‘Delegate some of those creative plans. Defer some for another day; and Discard some of those chores. But most of all, remember how God delights in you, apart from your achievements.’ Thanks be to God for Jane Buffett! She saw my tendency to overdo, somewhat related to an old and occasionally resilient silly urge to justify my existence by doing enough. Jane gently reminded me of the primacy of God’s grace and God’s relentless precious love. She reminded me of who and whose I was and that I was not alone in responding to God’s desire to help us all heal and grow and love.

I believe she overall actually did what is at the heart of the work and call of an ordained pastor: to guide, empower, love and support all of us in our journey to respond faithfully to the transformative good news of God’s love known in Christ. We do this planted in our complex and often messy relational lives and interconnected world. I am surely not somehow more holy or closer to God or purer than you are by virtue of being ordained though I may be noticeable overdressed at 9:30 am on a Sunday morning. People like Jane and now you inspire me by the grace of God to help us all mirror, remember, interpret, integrate and share through the wisdom and example of Christ, and tangible ways to share God’s love (i.e. sacraments, service etc.), the story of God’s love for all creation. We are all part of a flow of an on-going loving exchange. Our shared vocation as Christians is to love God with all our hearts and minds and soul and our neighbor as ourselves. Our call is to allow ourselves to be transformed, to grow, to soften, to love, to build up, to support each other in our joys and sorrows, to speak for those who have no voice, to recognize and protect the dignity of all of creation. We are all in this together and are all part of what the Reformer Martin Luther called “the priesthood of all believers.”

It is a privilege to walk with you along the journey of life and faith, to be invited to be present at times of celebration and times of loss. It is joy deeper than I can express in words when I see you support and uphold each other. It touches me to the core when I see you speak out on behalf of people who are left behind. I am transformed by your witness of how your own life is changing as you face your shadows and lean into your potential. I am heartened by your curiosity and deep desire to grow. I can weep when a teenager who is going through dealing with an eating disorder has the courage and the faith in us to say what is going on rather than try to hide it anymore. My job is to keep holding up the mirror that shows both where we are growing in love, seeing Christ in all we meet, and where we can yet grow deeper in faith, internally and in our outward expression through direct service. The Gospel/ Good News of Christ and the Holy Spirit guide the way.

Lest I sound too abstract about living Christ's Way, let me tell you one of my favorite stories about the shared challenge and invitation toward transformation. In her book, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott tells the story of Ranola and Ken, fellow church members she met during a difficult time in her life back in the 90s. Ranola was an older African-American woman and a long-time member of the choir at the small St. Andrew Presbyterian Church. Ranola was large, jovial and devout. Ken had started coming about a year earlier, just a few weeks before his partner Brandon died of AIDS. Although Ken was himself being ravaged by the disease, he was full of life and loved his church family. His emaciated and lopsided face was still radiant when he smiled. Ranola had been trying to love Ken but old messages condemning folks like him and her own unspoken fear of the disease were making this very hard for her.

When Ken returned to church after a month-long absence, he was weaker and lighter than ever. As the congregation sang the first hymn, everyone stood except for Ken who was holding the hymnal weakly in his lap. After a while, the congregation began to sing "God's Eye Is on the Sparrow" and Ken was once again the only one sitting. As the words were sung: "Why should I feel discouraged? Why do the shadows fall?" Ranola's heart began to melt. She stepped down from her place in the choir and walked over to Ken. She bent down to lift him up and he stood

draped over her, leaning on her as they sang. They became the body of Christ together. Thanks to the power of the Holy Spirit within them, their relationship was transformed from then on.

I am not suggesting that we grab everyone who may need to sit during singing, of course. That is not always helpful. Thankfully, there are many ways to lift each other up in the Spirit in love though being lifted to his feet was a gift to Ken that day. He was already experiencing what it means to have to deal with dying and still have hope in rising here and beyond. He had lost his partner and was himself terribly ill. Ranola had her own dying and rising, her own self-emptying, to do right in the middle of a church service. Ranola practiced what Paul identified as the essence of living the cross and living with the *mind* of Christ.

While there are several ways of interpreting the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection, all of them share a kenotic aspect, that is, of "outpouring" love for us. For Paul, it was by pouring himself out in love to the point of death, even for those who nailed him to the cross, that Christ freed Paul from making himself acceptable before God through his own virtue. If you recall our text, Paul wrote:

*"Let each of you not look to your own interests, but to the interests (needs) of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave (servant) ... and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross Phil 2:4-8."*¹

Ranola had to let go of her own fear and prejudice around AIDS and begin to ask whether God's spectrum of sexuality was broader than our human minds and even what her beloved biblical tradition was able to fathom in the past. Ken's need in the moment became greater than her own need to protect herself or to hold on to her judgments. Her response was a form of emptying or *kenosis* (Greek word meaning *emptying/letting go*) of her own will and prejudice while being obedient to the call of God. You may recall that *obedience* literally means: *to listen deeply* with our whole being. I know that such loving goes on in our church. A number of you have deliberately chosen to be part of a team, getting to know and working with Arlene (who is living

¹ This "text" was likely part of a hymn of the ancient church.

with autism and many health challenges) in a way that is mutually respectful and open to transformation. Any such learning to live and love in relationship together requires an on-going investment and also a letting go, a kind of self-emptying, while being renewed in the Spirit for all involved.

The story of Ranola and of the care within our own church also speaks to the proclamation of Jesus' work and vision as the Christ in the Gospel of Luke. As people committed to walking in his way, his vision is also our own. I chose this text this week instead of following the lectionary as usual because it was also the text used at my ordination. In this story, Jesus has come back to his hometown and is given the honor of reading from the prophet Isaiah during the service in the Synagogue:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (Luke 4:18).” The year of the Lord’s favor is a reference to the biblical vision of a Jubilee every 50 years when all debt was to be cancelled, slaves were to be set free and land allowed to rest. There is a dispute as to whether it was ever actually practiced but Jesus clearly promoted all that empowers and liberates us from whatever binds us, oppresses us or holds us down. As I think back to the story of Ranola and Ken, I am touched by how Ranola brought good news and release to Ken. At the same time, it was Ken’s presence and faithfulness that brought recovery of sight beyond her judgments to Ranola. Together, they proclaimed a kind of Jubilee from all that bound them, celebrating instead the love and favor of God toward all God’s children.

This is our shared calling as well, people of the Way! The Way is sometimes hard. It can include times of disorientation and needing to reorder our world around God’s vision rather than our own. As we continue to build this beloved community by the power of the Spirit, may the Holy Spirit continue to empty us of our own prejudices and fears us and open wide our hearts as Christ would have us do. May God guide us all in knowing our deepest identity and vocation as children of God in the priesthood of all believers.