Public Theological Vocation as Reflected in

Why I'm Like This:

Life in the Shade of a Dying Church

by

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The Public Theological Vocation of *Life in the Shade of a Dying Church*

From Jonah to Jesus and Jesus to Acts, in the varied genres of scripture's stories, God's disruptive insistence on embodied life together reveals the graces and challenges of humans living in the image of God. Throughout the witness of scripture, whether in verse, illustrative tale, metaphorical aphorism or honest recounting; this theme of the disparate together, of grafting in the other, as a part of God's vision for humanity; continues to emerge. My memoir of a life lived under the shade of and in the shadow of the dying American Protestant Church reveals a modern mixed genre chapter of this tale of grace and challenge. In a broader culture that has both well- and poorly-founded trust issues with the church, in a church that struggles to see its place and its potential in the everyday lives of human beings, I have found myself blessed and horrified, formed and malformed by this strange institution in which I have found my own daily life. Even still, I have found my story reflected in the scriptures the Christian Church stewards. I am angry and grateful at and on behalf of the church and at and on behalf of the world. I am troubled and challenged and welcomed by the surplus of meaning in scripture—and I'm trying to find a way to proclaim every one of the truths I've found in either place I also want to offer some access to those who have not seen the beauty in the middle of the church, the truth of the story it carries, day in and day out, helping us all through.

This story is meant to be a window into the secrets of a skeptical church insider—a pastor with a lot of questions and a good deal of angst—offered to her peers deeply within and totally outside of church. This story is written in the hope of casting a vision of what sometimes is, of offering a flash of familiarity and understanding, perhaps even building a connection, or giving some pastoral permission to be absolutely furious or utterly grateful as

needed—and to remember this too is faith and this too is part of the story. As it does this, the memoir seeks to keep faith with the arc of scripture's many stories and the truth of my own life. In this paper, using the book of Jonah, the life of Jesus, the call of Joel, and the community forming the book of Acts; I will map my own theological journey, as seen in my memoir, from my attempt at faithful rejection of both empire and any discussions of empire, to the embrace of a life in faithful community working out its resistance to empire.

I was raised in a family church—southern, Presbyterian, conservative, white, working class, liturgical, formerly affluent, briefly charismatic. All of these descriptors surrounded me, as well as shaping how I understand the truth—even the good and the bad—of what happened to and around me. There was deep love and care; there were ill-considered lies and completely inappropriate behavior—garden variety weirdness and basic American snobbery. In so many ways, I was born into the shade of safety—a tight knit community who had my back, had enough to eat, had moral clarity, and had kids my age who were (mostly) kind. The church—both the community I grew up in and the God that gathered it—shaded me when I was young and protected me in a way that allowed for ideals, opinions, and a voice of my own to form. The church guarded me from myself and from the world while I slowly became human. It gave me a particular sense, not just of what was happening in the world, but of what it meant. From this protected space, looking out a world I largely did not know, I decided perhaps both God and my place were deeper inside. I was seeking something real and the church was where I was told reality was—where it was born and where it was becoming. So I pursued ministry. More ambivalence bubbled up from there.

This memoir is an attempt to tell the situated truth of my own story within the church, lifting up how such a story falls in a long tradition of such stories of ambivalence, and how

God is present within such stories, often despite much evidence. This story tells my church secrets—the good and the bad, so that the broader church might again, in this small way, greet and shake hands with the broader world, and we might try to get to know ourselves and each other again, at least in this one, small, situated story.

I was taught that the Hebrew and Christian scriptures are the story of God's presence with God's people—from well before Jesus was born and the church was formed through the early days of church. I trusted this story (or collection of stories) as literal early on, but as that frayed and the people I trusted most were untroubled, I allowed them to hold for me the idea that truth could be literary, honest, meaningful, and powerful beyond the literal. Some of those trusted people were church people and some were English literature teachers. Blessedly, I came to love books and stories, and the sort of truths offered in fiction resonated deeply to my lived experience from an early age. Despite a wide breadth of reading, for good or for ill, the story of God's presence with me has ever been in the shadow of the Protestant, American, established church. This is the particular good news I have been given and the particular place from which I feel called to speak. In a world with increasing secularization and low church participation, this perspective is not just my story, but is becoming more and more my secret experience. In this way, this memoir functions as "my secret public journal,"[1] the story of grace as I have found it—a note of love and caution, to and from within the community that has raised me in the faith. In and under this story is a framework of beliefs and muscle memories that have grown out of what I found in my own narrative, that I am able to name thanks to my peculiar pastoral education, and church insider status, and the books that have accompanied me; as well as my life of living and

[1] Mike Birbiglia, *My Secret Public Journal Live*, CD (Columbus, Ohio: Jack Vaughn, 2007).

moving within and on the edges of this strange and increasingly small but still looming American Protestant ecosystem.

The theology of my multi-genre memoir follows an arc of scripture that offers a way forward to live alongside or within empire while telling a truth oriented toward a different good, bearing grace, facing death, finding community and ultimately living both prophetically and relationally in the midst of systems of power, money, and moral ambivalence. As Kiekegaard names, "Only the truth that upbuilds is truth for you"—so this is the truth I have built upon and been upbuilt by. This is the story of my journey to live rightly, to heal the pain and share the gifts of this churchy life as I have found them with those within and those beyond the church. My memoir journey does not arrive— in fact, arrival is, at most, a secondary goal. This memoir aims to tell truth—the kind that is troubling and weird and doesn't mince words; the kind that is sometimes kept secret or spun by charlatans for money or hell-fear reasons; the kind that is sometimes kept secret accidentally, waiting to be seen and held and adopted by those with eyes to see and willingness to actually look. As Rilke writes, "nearby is the country you call life. You will know it by its seriousness." This is truth I have remembered for its seriousness, and so it has become my life.

In the Presbyterian Church (USA), our confessions are meant to be interpreted first by the scriptures and then through the newest confessions interpreting the older confessions. While no part of this memoir is more or less true to my memory than any other, my intention is for the newest—that is the most recent part of the story, to interpret the oldest part of the story. Coming, as I do, from a tradition grafted into the story of Jacob, I recognize that the work of wrestling with God for a blessing takes time.[2] Blessings do not always look like blessings

[2] Genesis 32:24-28

immediately. As such, the arc of this memoir, following the temporal arc of scripture, is best seen through the lens of the blessings that are found at the end of the story.

The American Protestant Church, both the mainline denominational communions and the disestablished, free/non-denominational/megachurch variety, has long been in league with empire, even as parts of the church have always resisted. This was certainly true in the rhetoric around Christianizing the western "frontier," which included land grabs and genocides of the native peoples, establishing churches and ecclesial power structures throughout the west alongside governmental systems. Though "Christianizing" often began as an attempt to control the "other," the Christianity received, practiced, and established by the enslaved, formerly enslaved, and native peoples, has often formed prophetic resistance to that empire. Despite a complicated history with empire, self-awareness of the complicity of church traditions varies, as church leaders often voice frustration about their own persecution at the hands of "the culture" even as others notice the growth of Christian Nationalism as it purposely blurs the line between state and faith. As journalist Elizabeth Dias puts it, "Evangelicals did not support Mr. Trump in spite of who he is. They supported him because of who he is, and because of who they are… An entire way of life, one in which their values were dominant, could be heading for extinction. And Mr. Trump offered to restore them to power, as though they have not been in power all along."[3] In short, most of the American Protestant church's relationship with empire is cozy and long-lasting, even as the loudest church voices therein are increasingly agitated about their own future.

Power and fear coexist here. The American Church is a safe place to exercise power as long as it is willing to shill for the empire as it has historically done—that is, until the empire no

[3] Elizabeth Dias, "Christianity Will Have Power," *New York Times*, August 9, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/09/us/evangelicals-trump-christianity.html?searchResultPosition=32.

longer needs it. Sensing this, with suspicion and mistrust, many American Christians, especially those in the mainline and more progressive free church communities, have found themselves easing away from conversations about power, politics, and economics, which are the bread and butter of the empire's power grab. Seeking to avoid the implications of political power and economic dominance, these voices have found themselves at a loss for how to live in the middle of such an empire, a force that uses their own insider Christian language for narratives of justification and even rhetorical tools of dominance, violence, and exclusion. These Christians have made a show of trying to leave the power grab and step away from even the Christian language that seems to have betrayed them. Of course, no one still living and owning property in this empire can really step away from politics and economics, but sometimes it is less threatening to cover the truth of our complicity than to tell truth, especially when speaking of politics and economics has become anathema in many of our faith communities.

In the memoir's first section, I'm born into this struggle both to avoid and condemn empire, just as Jonah was called to it. As the story continues in section 2, I pursue ordination and find myself in the midst of a ragtag community of misfits hiding from and fighting against empire similar to that ragtag community that God chose for Godself in Jesus' disciples. The theological arrival in section 3, provisional though it may be, signals a move from the binary and performative engagement with empire to an embrace of the diversity of shared life a reader sees subverting empire in the book of Acts .

As Miguel De La Torre points out, the Assyrian Empire, of which Nineveh was a part, shares much in common with the American Empire, and for the purposes of the Jonah

story, the parallels are helpful to unearth a liberative reading of the text.[4] Jonah is called by God as a member of one of the oppressed peoples of the empire to speak a word of judgment to the empire city—a word that would make him vulnerable to their power and could even threaten his life. God calls Jonah and then physically forces him to go to enter a conversation framed and crafted by the powers of empire and offer an entirely new message—a threat of death. He had no interest in entering such a conversation, in offering God's power as a counter to empire, or in predicting death and destruction. Indeed, Jonah only goes to offer this word of death to empire after his own life has been physically threatened multiple times. So he arrives, as a stranger to a place he never hoped to go, to participate in a conversation structured by dominance, exploitation, and supremacy culture; a conversation that he never wanted to have. He walks right into the center of an empire he hates. He does not love Nineveh or what they stand for, but he also very clearly tried to avoid coming into their city with damning news. It becomes clear later he would rather have God just go ahead and smite them without warning. In terms of engagement with this empire, Jonah would have preferred not to.

The reader knows nothing of Jonah's life back home—the life from which he was called away. There is no indication that he had been speaking against Nineveh or organizing resistance to the Assyrian Empire in any particular way. The first we hear of Jonah is that God came to him and told him to go to Nineveh and that Jonah tried, in response, to do the opposite of that. The text of Jonah says that he "set out to flee… from the presence of the

[4] Miguel De La Torre, *Liberating Jonah: Forming an Ethics of Reconciliation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 28-30.

Lord."[5] Which is to say, if God is interested in Nineveh, then Jonah isn't interested in God. This is where my American Church story meets Jonah's tale.

If the Church is where God is calling me and the Church is a shill for empire, maybe there is no room for me in the Church—maybe not even in the faith. Perhaps I should flee to Tarshish.

It's possible that Jonah and I share a tendency toward absolutism and black and white thinking. While the theology of my creative piece does not advocate black and white thinking, nor this reductive definition of either church or empire, it does explore the question of relationship between the two. I think this question must be explored in this particular era of ambiguities and obfuscations around faith, power, and empire. As my story crosses Jonah, I too, like him, have found myself in the midst of a people of God, a particular called group, that is part of the empire ecosystem, in but trying not to be of the empire. I am implicated with and I am connected to, maybe even benefiting from, the empire. But I'm not benefiting like the real benefactors are, I tell myself. I don't like those actual benefactors, those power-grabbers and money makers, because they are unjust and oppressive—and I'm trying to stay away from them. I fear them and that fear makes me feel absolved of what they do with power and politics and economics. I prefer to avoid exploring their methods and engaging the implications of the empire they create. And if God wants to talk about it? If God wants to do anything but smite them without warning? Then, I have some questions about that God.

[5] Jonah 1:3

And so does Jonah. It turns out that Jonah and I both share an angry skepticism and an inflated since of our own righteousness in comparison to the empire in question.

Here my theology follows Jonah. For whatever reason, arriving at a clear call to ministry was something given to me. My life wasn't threatened and my hand wasn't as forced as Jonah's was, but this was mostly due to my own ignorance as to what it meant to follow the call. Jonah knew he didn't want to do what God was asking. I didn't know what God was asking at all, so I didn't hate the calling—it fell to me in a way that felt both freeing and unyielding rather than particularly righteous or strategic. I did not do it because it would make me right or good, I had no particular faith that it would. I had no sense of what fruit it might bear in me or in the world. I did it because I had to or else I did not feel I would be free to speak the truth as I saw it. I also didn't have Jonah's good sense to be terrified, so I didn't run away so aggressively. I didn't know of all the loyalties it would divide for me, or how much of ordination is about pastoring and prophecy to those you are called to love before you love them and those you are called to speak hard truth to when you totally understand and even share their perspective. Once I arrived in the role of preacher, I longed to fulfill my charge with confidence and strength, with unyielding clarity. I wanted to come correct and be correct. The result was something much more like a very desperate person, covered in fish bile, offering dire prophecies to this insider community I struggled to love. The theology of Jonah is resonant because the experience of Jonah—the absurdity and the soap opera big feelings of the story—is resonant. I too have found God demanding and confounding. I too have been frustrated by God's willingness to speak judgment, God's willingness to involve me in God's work, God's willingness to speak grace, and God's willingness to expect me to be in the scrum of life, with the good and the bad and everything in between. What I have most wanted was clarity, a righteous path to walk, a clear conscience, and someone worse

than me that I could yell at and God would punish. What I most wanted was to be able to tell the truth—to be trusted, trusting, and trustworthy. But, like Jonah, I am sometimes given truth that is hard and dangerous and then doesn't turn out to be truth at all, because it is overshadowed by a greater, more gracious truth. Sometimes I am given grace for those who deserve punishment and sometimes the whole bit violates my own deep desire for justice and anger and moving with my own deep sense of right and wrong.

This is, in part, the fact that, like Jonah, my own deep sense of right and wrong has been formed by empire. It has been influenced by those who kept me safe and taught me how to keep safe in the power and money grab of the empire. It has been influenced by my privilege to walk away from the hardest words and the harshest realities, to avoid the conversations that bring me into contact with the contingency and vulnerability of life in the empire. I have been formed by both a desire to be in control of the economic and the political systems of the day and to avoid political and economic conversations at all, as tainted as they are by the contagions of empire and its ruling class. Indeed it may be that these things fit more naturally together than one might imagine—that certain control can only be exercised if one pointedly ignores the implications—if one pretends or even believes one is powerless in the face of such control. Engaging the conversations around control might reveal the violence that control either does or allows.

So, I have been formed by institutions and individuals who have invited me to hide my face from the realities I do not feel I can control. I have been formed to imagine I can control less than I do and less than I can, and I am reticent to talk about these things. As a result of this, I cannot always trust my felt sense of right and wrong. I, like Jonah, might attempt to flee the presence of God entirely, if God declared Godself to be in the midst of an empire—

supporting it or judging it, either way the result makes me want to run away. Would I be fleeing my complicity or God's? I'm not sure it matters. Jonah, mad about God pushing him to speak judgment to Nineveh and even more mad about God's grace for Nineveh, seems to feel the same way. Caught up as he is in the realities of empire, his own sense of vulnerability within it, his own power to speak death over it, one understands why he might be particularly furious at Nineveh not being obliterated, why he might not even see the truth, that if it were to be destroyed, in its destruction he would find his own, contingent as he is on a broader shared economy.

Jonah understands himself as fully apart from Nineveh and on the side of God, imagining the connection to flow from God to Jonah and from Jonah to Nineveh. When God surprises Jonah by talking to the people of Nineveh directly, I imagine Jonah feels a bit like the call he didn't want is suddenly stolen from him, his place of privilege disrupted as God makes him a liar by withholding divine destruction. In this, God has made Jonah one among many, elevating the importance of the evil empire to Jonah's level before God. God preserves Jonah's life in the belly of the fish. God preserves Nineveh when they repent. Nineveh is saved because its people trust Jonah's words and repent. Jonah is saved because he consents to find his prophetic voice, not in his home country, but in Nineveh, this empire, this great city. Jonah finds God's grace in neither avoiding nor attempting to destroy the other. The path to God's salvation in the book of Jonah is through shared living and interdependence. The way to find God's grace is to consent to life together, to walk the same streets, dwell in the same city, even to live lives whose grace depends on each other. Importantly, it does not depend on avoiding a hard or even damning word. In fact, salvation depends on naming the reality of evil and its consequences. It also depends on repentance—in sackcloth and ashes right down to the farm animals.

As my memoir reflects a life of ambivalence within this empire—and within the church's ambivalent relationship to that empire–the theme of communal interdependence and interconnectedness appears over and over. My childhood which offered a dense web of community—a village even–that shaded and protected my formation, that clearly communicated that I was loved, and that wrongly gave me confidence about my own righteousness and my own specialness.

My formative years, as explored in section 1, *Born in the Shade*, speak to where my Jonah impulses came from. There are stories that make you want to run from the conversation about life in the church, to hide from questions of power, authority, money, and politics. There is both naïve weirdness and profound unholiness in the stories of the community that raised me. There is absurdity and there is cruelty. Before and behind all that, though, is the steady love, protection, and clarity of my parents, my family, and much of my church village. There is, just as there is for Jonah, a complicated grace of still needing to be in relationship with those you might want to damn or run from. Even still, there is life to be found in that grace. This series of experiences convinces me that the truth of our experiences and how they came to us—no matter how weird or troubling, no matter how surprisingly peaceful or aggressively gracious that truth might be—is the only way to speak of God, God's people, and God's calling in the world. In short, coming out of the childhood in section 1, I am possessed of a desire to know and speak the truth as I experienced it, come what may. The truth is sometimes a word of damnation. Sometimes the truth is a word of grace. Both of these ultimately depend on God. What I can offer, and what I can trust, is that God is the God of truth—the God of all reality, all that is. The book of Jonah reflects a troubling and funny, complicated, difficult but clear-eyed picture of God's movement in the world. The story of Jonah clings to all the ambivalences of grace in a complicated and embodied world

without skirting the issues of power and the difficulty of community. The book of Jonah gives license for other people of faith to do the same. Did Jonah literally exist? Perhaps not, but the truth that is presented—the things that are hardest and most blessed about the story—resonate to my lived experience of the life of faith.

My early years in ministry unveiled to me the edges of the empire. I encountered those whose suffering spoke of judgment, those whose suffering forced me to be present for conversations about politics and money and how power operated implicitly under the guise of not seeing itself. I found myself angry and caustic, hurt and aware of my own hurtfulness, my own minimal courage, my own unwillingness to face where I stood on the continuum of oppressed and oppressor. The revelation I felt was akin to what the reader imagines Jonah must feel upon God's final words in the text—the anger and the self-righteousness no longer serve. Are we to despair and die? If not, how then must we live?

The arc of scripture is broad and multivalent, but the Christian faith that I was taught, that I revert to, from preschool Sunday school to seminary to ordered ministry in my present day to day living, is the model of Jesus Christ rather than the church. Maybe it's because my mother has always talked about Jesus like he lived in our house and she regularly chatted with him over morning coffee. Perhaps it's because I went to a seminary that draws deeply on Karl Barth's Christology, his statement that "Jesus Christ as attested to us in Holy Scripture is the one Word of God whom we must hear and whom we must trust and obey in life and in death," and his conviction that the Light of Life that comes in Christ is mediated directly to all creatures rather than only being mediated through the church.[6,7] Maybe it's

[6] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, vol. IV.3.1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), 3.
[7] Urlich Mauser, "The Theological Declaration of Barmen Revisited," *Theology Matters* 6, no. 6 (2000): 11, https://www.theologymatters.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/00Vol6-No6-TM.pdf.

because when everything feels grim and ambivalent, when the church feels complicit and the daily mundane violence of empire is all around us, I remember that the Gospel story is one of a God who came to be with us and in so doing, elevated humanness in Godself, a God who was put to death by empire and lived again to invite us into another way of living. Maybe it is that God chose to be human and to live life in a ragtag community some faith insiders, some faith outsiders, and ragtag community is where I've found all the holiness I've known as well. As my memoir moves through the arc of my life, I keep the ambivalence, the complicity, the anger and the desire for honesty that Jonah carries. In Jesus, though, even God comes close and continues to come close. The victors and the victims of the empire both start to carry the holiness humanity receives when God becomes flesh with us. In short, even the violence in my own anger starts to break my heart.

Jesus pulls people together. He gathers the disciples up out of their jobs and their communities and brings them across boundaries and into conversations with new and strange people. The disciples show up and make mistakes and are complicit with empire at a variety of junctures—asking to be the greatest in the coming kingdom, sending children away from Jesus, cutting off ears for spite, denying they know Jesus at the most crucial moments, leaving him to die alone at the hands of the empire they had hoped to subvert. The community Jesus cultivates in the disciples is an inauspicious start to culture building amongst Christ followers to be sure. Reading these stories, one finds it easy to judge the disciples and to grow frustrated with their inconsistency and anger. This is the story I start to tell of my life in the church in section 2—I find myself in the belly of church, buying into its absurd revolutionary story, doubting it when the time comes for it to be true, resenting my fellows as their complicity shows up alongside my own. We—the church, the disciples, the people who raised me, the people who betrayed Jesus, the people who betrayed each other,

the people I betrayed, and the people who betrayed me—we are all here in the messy middle, figuring out life together trying to learn to make peace with the right things and never make peace with the wrong things. It is both comforting and alarming to embrace the idea that Jesus is here with us even in the moral ambivalence of life in the empire. It is both comforting and alarming that this flesh of ours is shared—even made holy by a holy God.

The middle season of my ministry, section 2, *Blinded by the Light*, which takes place in Philadelphia, has a bit of the revolutionary, leave-your-family-for-an-uncertain-pay-check, listen-to-the-wild-prophets, tilt-at-giants, heal-the-sick, attempt-to-subvert-the-empire character that one finds in the day to day itinerant life of the disciples in the gospels. This season in my life also shares the limited timeline of that season for Jesus and the disciples. Perhaps even God knew that this sort of work is hard to sustain much longer than three years at a time?

This vision of community—12 random, common people from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives, healing the sick and feeding the masses, trying to do right and stumbling over themselves, disliked by the religious authorities and even more so by the government—is public but separate, drawing strangers in but almost never all the way in, because the life these 12 share is just a little too much for most of their fellow citizens on the outside. People are curious, compelled even, but most are not trying to leave their lives and families for this. Yet, this little committed group is where God chose to start a revolution. This is where God chose to spend God's one human life.

My community in Philadelphia felt like this: interdependent, broke and depending on benefactors, doing direct service with the sick and the hungry, seeing so much vulnerability and life on the edge, sharing meals in random places, almost always supplied by the

hospitality of others. Also the yelling and the politics about where to go and what to do and even whom to follow—that was a part of disciple life that showed up in my Philadelphia ministry life. This life was chaotic and not safe—both the things we did and the people we worked with were outside the ordered walls of neoliberal empire structure and order, roles and processes. As there were for the disciples, there were upper rooms for us to hide in and people who protected our work and our funding. There were even moments those among us were able to speak back to the empire (church or nation), to call out what we saw in it. Likewise, everything we did was bound up with food. We broke bread and shared it when it didn't look like enough, we feasted before and during and after disaster. The tables, covered in crumbs (both food and plaster), were in the middle of the sanctuaries. Everything started at the tables and everything happened in the sanctuaries. Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me" and we spent a lot of time remembering, tilting at giants, imagining, like the disciples did, that it could last forever.

But Jesus is a revolutionary and revolutions do not last forever. This was not something we knew until Jesus came and told us, just as it was not something the disciples knew until Jesus up and got himself killed. I had no sense of the final meals we had in Philadelphia being our last, or the people we shared life with somehow not joining us in the slow walk toward middle age. Holiness, as it stands outside the frame of the empire, can flare up and burn hot. Nothing felt quite so present and immanent as those flare ups. We were ever trying to build them out—to make them into a system or a community or an institution, even just a movement we could hold and name and move in. But as much as the holiness was present, it was also not yet—and trying to hold the holy in a permanent way made it all feel all the more not yet. I imagine the disciples saw the story of holy week and Jesus' death as a series of tragic and spiraling misfortunes, rather than the inevitability that we know to see in the story

when we read it now. I imagine they saw this holy possibility, this beautiful and secret world they had known amongst themselves slipping away from them, unable to be grasped, as they tried and tried again to stop the slow whir of empire from grinding it to bits. For us, Jesus pretty clearly asked us to move away from Philadelphia. It wasn't until later that the empire came grinding for the communities we had called home, sending them into further diaspora. Because there is grace and because death isn't finally final—Jesus left us to go on our way, and rejoined us on the Emmaus road, leaving us nothing to hold onto but the hope that the holiness is still among us, even in a new way and in a new frame, even on a new road to a new place.

As the memoir explores in section 3, *Life Together,* the ministry season in Pittsburgh is welcomed with a fictional story about finding God and holy space out beyond the spaces and frames in which I had previously found it. This story isn't factually true, but it reflects the season and the experience, and it reflects some of the literal truth about their setting. In this season, holiness, like the Holy Spirit, blows where it will and shows up all sorts of places and in all sorts of people. The season explored in section 3 finds me living alongside the book of Acts as its community navigates the boundary-breaking and intimacy-building movement of the Holy Spirit. This is a season of mutual care in our communal life, even as it mostly comes to us beyond the institution of the church. In his Acts Commentary, Willie James Jennings describes the book of Acts as "The Revolution of the Intimate," and even though our time in Philadelphia was characterized by deep connection and collaborative community, it is this season and the setting of Pittsburgh that has made intimacy revolutionary across various boundaries and backgrounds and ways of thinking.[8] The move

[8] Willie James Jennings, *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017) 3.

to Pittsburgh felt like a diaspora for my family. In a season where we hoped to engage directly with some of the growing ills of racism, fascism, and nationalism, within the church and within the world, we moved to a place where elements of such thought felt more present in both church and world. In the midst of that, we found our own day to day life more distant from the church and the world than they were previously, as we worked in theological higher education and only very sporadically led worship or bible study or even Sunday School. But just as in the book of Acts, we found ourselves called as Christians "to be open to the action of the Spirit, not only leading… [us]… to confront values and practices in society that may need to be subverted, but perhaps even.. to subvert or question practices and values within the church itself."[9] Indeed, in our case, we were also called to reconsider practices and values within our own lives. I recognized more and more that the church was in league with empire, but I was less aware of the way my own desire to avoid such empire entanglements and power games made me blind to my complicity with the empire as well as to my own unwillingness to name and engage the realms of power wherein that work of empire occurred. I preferred to think of empire as far away from me and entirely separate from my daily living. My life wasn't good enough or fancy enough to truly be a benefactor of empire, I reasoned. Oh, I recognized the churches that weaponized politics in a dominionist way. I recognized churches and pastors that leveraged economics to line their pockets but my response was just as often to attempt avoidance of both arenas rather than to wade into the ambiguities of working toward gospel politics and gospel economics day in and day out. I had done so before haltingly and only in the safety of my Philadelphia crew, only with the binary vision of one who imagines oneself and one's collaborators to be pure prophets. Things were different now as the crew I found myself

[9] Justo L. González, *Acts: The Gospel of the Spirit* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), 8.

amidst was diverse and untried. Pittsburgh is a backdrop of industrial smog and shifting, hollowed out soil. This is racist-labor-union-building, violent-management-union-busting, no permanent friends, no permanent enemies, contested Appalachian coal territory. Pure prophets don't tend to end up in Pittsburgh—and that included me. Things felt murky here under the habitually gray skies of the Paris of Appalachia.[10]

What does thrive in Pittsburgh is Christian community. Broad Christian community—conservative and liberal, old and young, urban and suburban, high and low church, mainline and free church–is shared across our holy dividing lines here. The impulse of Jonah to insist on who is a sheep and who is a goat and the revolutionary, precarious, and extrajudicial culture of the disciples—these attitudes do not thrive here. Pittsburgh's Christian community seems to be where sheep and goats and revolutionaries come to settle down—to raise their kids and do the daily work of fighting for their ideals in the midst of daycare pickups. Or perhaps that was just the life season where it met me. This group of people is welcoming and open to differences of practice and belief in ways I would have found offensive or lukewarm in the past. This community wants to trust a fellow Christian's faithful discernment in the way I never would have before. The community and its members are not necessarily comfortable with empire, though perhaps some are. More often I think that this community is gracious with empire or rather, with those trying to do right and also survive within and on the edge of the empire. There is a way in which resources are shared in common—connections, insights, actual resources—a way that prophets are materially cared for, are not scapegoated and sent alone into the wilderness. We are theirs and they are ours and nothing is perfect—so there is room for right and true speaking and also living and

[10] Brian O'Neill, *The Paris of Appalachia: Pittsburgh in the Twenty-First Century* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 2009), 1.

finding daily sustenance in this morally ambivalent world. There is room to challenge and be challenged and to raise a family and pay taxes and have health insurance.

When I first came here, I was concerned that this was a theology of safety and of comfort. But I've come to see that this may be the opposite—that this may be the theology of Joel at work. To prophecy among the choir, to count one's own righteousness as primary and reject the faithful work of others, to pretend you alone are above the moral ambivalence of surviving in a fallen world, is to rend your clothing and neglect your heart.[11] The Christian community of Pittsburgh has invited me to make my life here. The call has been to put not only my clothing—my public persona and my political and theological litmus tests—into the vulnerable space of life in community, but to place my whole heart, my whole life in the midst of this people. The call is to rely on them and find my home, my human-sized life, in their midst. They are my neighbors and my colleagues, my drinking buddies and my political co-conspirators, the people I call when my heater breaks, the people whose kids I babysit, the people who bring me soup when I am sick.

Willie James Jennings writes, "The hierarchies nurtured so carefully by the Roman Empire are being undone by the Spirit, who will not release slave or free, Jew or Gentile, to their own self-interpretations but who will relentless prod them to open themselves toward one another in a life that builds the common."[12] Pittsburgh, this corner of the empire, has been "the common" for me, where the Holy Spirit has relentlessly resisted my grasping for a determinate and independent self-interpretation, and has instead turned me over, in full life and body, to the common that has welcomed me here. Indeed, the trajectory of section 2 into section 3 of the memoir follows closely the trajectory of Acts 4, which begins with a

[11] Joel 2:13
[12] Jennings, 9

hope for the boldness to speak up in the face of the world as it is, in the face of powers and principalities, and shifts rather quickly to a community sharing all things in common. As Jennings writes, "Boldness is not the ultimate gift but the intensification of the common. The common is the gift realized in the Spirit."[13] As I have moved from the fiery life of Philadelphia ministry to the daily rhythms of the community in Pittsburgh, the common is indeed the gift I have realized. This is the experience of God to which I testify in section 3.

While the theologies of this memoir are meant to map various seasons of my faith and church experience and thus welcome readers from a wide variety of seasons themselves, the memoir concludes in section 3, recognizing the gift of community, of "the commons" and the life together that hosts God's presence in our midst, as the goal of my current public theology. This theology builds on but does not undermine the honest confusion of justice and the resistance to call I felt in my Jonah years. This theology deepens and sustains and humanizes my years among the prophets in Philadelphia. The whole arc reflects the God who came to be with us to call us to live amidst each other, and even in the midst of empire, to build out a community whose deep connection will resist violence and commodification, and will ultimately fit us for a life eternal where, perhaps, like a communion meal, all will be God's and thus, all will be common. Indeed, that arc is more of a spiral of knowing and seeing that God comes close in new and surprising ways, an arc of growing more aware of the holy in turns, even as it has always been present.

But who am I to say all of this, as Prufrock asks, "And how should I presume?"[14] First, part of the theology this piece hopes to make clear is that nothing ontological makes me special.

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[13] Jennings, 49-50

[14] T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of j. Alfred Prufrock by T. S. Eliot," Poetry Foundation, accessed February 3, 2024, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/44212/the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock.

My aim is for the tension and paradox of these stories to reveal the story of someone screwed up and loved in ways particular and thereby unearth a sort of universality in particularity. Indeed, the scandal of the particularity of incarnation—the fact that at a certain time, in a certain empire, born of a certain woman, God chose to join us as a certain person—that particularity gives invitation to our own human particularities. What situates me as the writer of this text is neither strength of character nor practiced spirituality. I am called to speak honestly of my particular story because no one else quite shares it—and because in the incarnation, God has come near, making both humanness and particularity holy. The case that remains to be made is whether my particularity matches the story I have set out to tell. Given this, the case I make for my own authorship is not based on whether my actions, experiences, and resulting perspective are good or bad, but whether they are actually grounds for the story of this memoir. This means I'm in the odd position of proving myself as a church insider, a church skeptic, and a generally honest person.

If we imagine Presbyterian preaching and leadership to be something that one could be credentialed for, just as Paul understands himself as credentialed for Judaism when he says, "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless,"[15] I suppose I do come pretty close. Born a Presbyterian, baptized as a baby, and raised in the church, Presbyterian camps, Massanetta and Montreat, a new Presbyterian church in college, straight to Princeton, ordained at 25, local Presbytery and General Assembly volunteer—I have marched my way through many of the litmus test

[15] Philippians 3:4b-6

experiences. But as Paul rightly points out, this is poor cause for presumption to anything other than particularity. These experiences give me perspective and locate me in the belly of the American Protestant church. They have exposed me to theological and practical church language, which helps me get my mind around all these practices and the beliefs behind them. They have even given me the sort of secret access to church style weirdness and incoherence that is hard to see as fully from the outside.[16] The reason, then, that I presume is the prophets I have encountered—the people who have shown me their truth and their hospitality inside and outside the church, who have been honest with me and let me share their lives, sometimes at great vulnerability or great cost. These are the people that have taught me what incarnation means, what hospitality means, and what truth is even on the backdrop of the lies told in the church and world.

The church has and has not been trustworthy, has and has not told the truth. As someone who is somewhat inescapably–by birth, by baptism, by ordination, by familial location–within the church, I want to be trustworthy to those I have encountered— to tell the truth I've been offered by those who have welcomed me. I want to tell the truth about what I have seen and heard. I want to keep faith with what I have been given. I also have no interest in protecting the church from itself. So I part of my practice and commitment as a public theologian is to tell the truth to the best of my ability. I promise to admit suspicion and anger and joy and my own smallness when I recognize it. I promise to do my best to make space for the reader's experience alongside my own and to name as honestly as possible what I have seen and any clarity I have as it has come to me. Indeed, my experience is what frames and informs the theology of the common that I come to. Whether I succeed

[16] It's worth noting here that it isn't hard to get inside, it just isn't something a lot of people want to do. This makes my perspective rare, but not difficult to acquire.

in the work of honesty and trust building is for the reader to decide. What I hope for this work is that it might open up the places that have been secret in the church, to let the sunlight and the outsiders in, not to change them or convert them, but because I believe in the Acts 2 vision of so many voices hearing a story in their own languages, and not being required to learn an insider tongue to gain an understanding of Good News.

This memoir is a story I offer to the public because I don't believe you should be charged a lifetime commitment to the Christian faith to understand what that faith might be like to live within, especially when you, at least in our American culture, couldn't fully avoid that faith if you tried. This is, perhaps, an introduction—a letter from the inside of sorts. I offer this to those in the public who might be curious, who might have questions, but feel hesitant to engage. Indeed, I believe that part of my ordination vows include caring for and working for those who cannot come to church, for what the church has done to them, for what it represents, for whatever reason. This means that I have to respect that they do not come. This is a lesson that also comes from the incarnation, wherein God comes as one particular man, with little to no hierarchical power, who was ultimately a victim of state violence. A God like this does not abide coercion or extortion. So, I have to respect the complex feelings of those beyond (and those within) the faith—and to that I offer this particular window to the inside of a faith world that looms so large on our shared societal landscape. This isn't what it looks like to everyone, but it is what it has looked like to me. You don't have to read it, but you can.

I offer this not just to the ether, not just for my own reasons, but because other people have been defining in my story, and so I hope to offer them honest witness in return. I offer this to a particular set of others, a particular public, because they are who I have known and

those whose questions I've heard. Indeed, the more I introduce myself as a pastor at bars and get welcomed, the more I realize that people around my age, people in urban areas, people who like Belgian beers and a double-digit dollar salads with a weird cheese, are feeling complicated about organized religion.[17] Responses and regular questions in the face of such self-disclosure run the gamut from, "What are you doing *here*?" to "I'm so sorry I was just swearing!" to "Really? Once when I was on mushrooms, I had this incredible spiritual experience," to "Seriously?! Does that mean you can't have sex!?" In short, it seems people want to talk about it and people are hoping for honesty. The people with these questions want to understand and be understood.

Given this sample set of Pennsylvania local beer drinkers and bar patrons, I've furthered my research on this group of spiritually complicated and religiously adjacent people. Apparently, one of the most quickly growing groups in the United States religious landscape are those who feel ambivalent about church or even religion as a whole.[18] Alternately named the "dones," the "nones," the "nothing in particulars," the "umms" and "spiritual-but-not-religious," there are a growing number of people who were or maybe even want to be people of faith, people who are curious about the matters of faith but frightened by the people of faith, people who long for the people but are frightened by the faith content and even

[17] In case it isn't clear, these people, like me, are citizens of empire.
[18] https://projects.apnews.com/features/2023/the-nones/the-nones-us.html#:~:text=The%20nones%20account%20for%20a,as%20long%20as%20three%20decades.

people who grew up in the church and now hate everything about it.[19,20] In short, there is a growing number of people who feel a way about faith and about organized religion.

At the same time, books by theologians and religious thinkers, especially those who have complex or even skeptical views about the communities they still claim belonging with, are finding resonance with readers who are charting paths to make or find meaning. Books like Michelle Huneven's Search, Nadia Bolz-Weber's Pastrix, or Kate Bowler's Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved invite people into not only the difficult moments of organized religion, but the powerful and meaningful moments, as these authors leave both open for review in humorous and poignant ways.

For those who have left faith communities, there is camaraderie, comfort, and even humor to be found in the shared memories and experiences of a childhood marked by the strange norms of a particular community and faith community, much like that chronicled in A Girl Named Zippy: Growing Up Small in Moreland, Indiana, by Haven Kimmel (a theologian herself).[21] Perhaps, like me, someone else also received hand-me-downs from a pinch-mouthed lady who mentioned that the Lord told her to share her castoffs since her family was blessed with so much more money than theirs. Maybe others tried to hide in the linen closet until they were successfully bribed with the promise of those ring butter cookies to go to a children's choir practice led by a lady who didn't like children. Or, maybe they too watched as 15 people showed up to sit in a hospital waiting room after their loved one was

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[19] Mike Moore, "The Rise of the 'Umms,'" ChristianityToday.com, March 29, 2022, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/march-web-only/church-statistics-return-in-person-nones-dones-umms.html.
[20] Perry Bacon, "I Left the Church — and Now Long for a 'Church for the Nones,'" *The Washington Post*, August 21, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/08/21/leaving-christianity-religion-church-community/.
[21] Haven Kimmel, *A Girl Named Zippy* (New York, NY: Broadway Books, 2002).

in a nearly fatal car accident on the way to deliver the church coffee hour donut holes. Sometimes there is healing or just relief in another person seeing and naming such a thing—whether it's silly or holy, and reflecting it back to you.

For those who have never been a part of such communities, the quirks and real transcendence of these experiences are only the stuff of legend, and the opportunity to look into the quirks and triumphs of another way of living carries a more anthropological fascination. Showing up as a pastor, with her own story and her own reality at the corner bar, I invited such interested interlocutors.

For me, living out the gratitude for the good in my formative years, and working toward healing the pain of them is the work of the rest of my life. Experience in spaces of religious practice, and the tight communities of belonging that often come with them, offer rich fodder for making meaning of both tasks. Given the prevalence of American spiritual seekers and spiritual vagabonds, a book about one life lived in the shadow of the church's dying monopoly on meaning offers shared space for the joy, pain, and absurdity of doing life together. Such a story offers a path toward the possibility of believing that God isn't dead, despite evidence to the contrary, even though one can see him dying on various sizes of crosses all over sacred buildings, all over the country. As such, this memoir hopes to bear witness to all the complexity of that visible, literal, and metaphorical dying alongside the patches and pockets of thriving holiness in our shared world. In short, this is a public theological apology for delight, which Ross Gay defines as, "the pleasurable evidence of our connectedness,"[22] to God and each other. Despite it all and because of it all, this is a public

[22] Ross Gay with Xime Silva, approach it with wonder: a conversation with ross gay on the method to solidarity and our intrinsic connection, other, *The Interlochen Review*, April 2023, https://www.interlochenreview.org/ross-gay.

argument for shared life and the faithfulness therein—it's an argument for what you might, regardless of the institution or movement, call church.

Appendix: Sample Chapter from Creative Manuscript

Chapter 7: Life Together

When I started as a pastor, I believed that with enough care and attention, people who seemed bent on being difficult would abandon their commitments to chaos and choose to live well in community. They just needed boundaries, clarity, and hours of pastoral time and attention.

Rick was one such person. He was neat and careful, with bright white hair, surprisingly trendy glasses, and a gentle bearing that felt out of place in rough and tumble Kensington, with its row homes and good hearted, rough tongued union workers; sweatpants wearers; and abandoned empty gallon plastic bottles of Jacquin's blackberry brandy dotting the messy sidewalks, just blocks from where this concoction was distilled. Rick would sweep the sidewalks, mow the church lawn without being asked, and work part time in a long formal black wool coat at his niece's funeral home across the street.

He came by the church to chat occasionally, and then often, and he was "born again," in the sincere way that actually wants to talk about Jesus rather than hit you with Jesus. Our faiths were formed in different spaces and he approached this weird, artsy little church with the two young lady pastors as a benevolent curiosity. Somewhere in the various mythologies he lived by, it made sense to help at the church, come to worship, and ask about what people believed and practiced, even as it slowly became clear that he had some questions about how women might relate to ministry. But at the time we fancied ourselves and this little church a pretty question-friendly community.

Rick slowly became known as a leader in the faith community. He came every Sunday and served as a consummate churchman. He spoke up at prayer time and welcomed visitors with grace, even the difficult ones. But it started to become clear that he would catch himself in cycles of thought. He would come by the church wanting to talk about the same few issues or email the same long form questions again and again. He was never quite satisfied that we understood the gravity of his query when we offered a response with openness rather than conceding a black and white answer. It slowly became clear that he was targeting the issue of

LGBTQ+ inclusion and affirmation. He had found us out—the young lady pastors supported the queer community.

It was hot that Sunday and the little un-air-conditioned church was peopled with the glistening usual suspects—Sarah and David and their little girl Nelly; Gail and Martha, a mother and daughter duo who embodied the generations of faithful women who have formed church communities everywhere; Caty, the single mother of three who made her children's world run on duct tape, disability, and deep goodness; and of course Meghan, who was there rapt with delight and waiting for communion.

The room was filled with the faithful. Leadership was divided between co-pastors, and our student pastor Anna, who was by far the quietest of the bunch, but steely, and secretly 5 years younger than anyone thought. When the former church had closed the red carpet came out, and a lit blond Jesus and red polyester velvet wall curtains came down. Now worship happened all on the same level, with the sacramental table right in the middle on a second hand oriental rug. Once we moved to the prayer request portion of the service, the pastors would walk back and forth across the rug to hear and repeat what people were sharing. We didn't do any policing of prayers, but we did a fair bit of repeating, and the occasional reframing.

People often prayed for what was really on their mind, which made for holy moments, but also the occasional graphic image or profanity—once a rather graphic prayer for a pregnant cat. On that warm June Sunday, Anna was leading prayers. Each week we prayed right before communion, putting all our hopes and fears right in the middle of the room—almost on the communion table, before everyone was invited to come up and partake of the meal.

Prayers were going smoothly, and I was soaking up the beauty of this precious little community from my perch in the first row of the rolling pews, adjacent to the communion table, just across from the old pulpit. These moments when I could pray invisible, in the midst of worship, were perhaps the moments I loved most in pastoring the little church—just watching it be itself, without any orchestration from me, being led by this brilliant pastoral team, doing what they were called to do. As I remember the moment, it was almost as if the room was lit in a warm yellow glow of holiness when the crash came. I was in a trance when the words of Rick's prayer reached me, "…offer prayers for…pastors who don't take seriously the words of scripture… who call sin a marriage and don't speak up against…"—even when it struck me, the words and phrases never resolved into sentences, though I'm sure they were there. He was angry but not frantic, voice loud and clear, looking somber and controlled with glowing white hair.

Anna was still moving as she heard him, though her steps shifted from walking forward him to hear to peddling back just a step, head and eyes still forward, staring right back at him. I was still coming to when she went in for the reframe—loud and clear and even, not giving in to the drama, not offering up a fight, "Lord we pray for wisdom for all of us as we read scripture and listen for your word to us. We pray that we would hear it rightly when we disagree. We pray that our reading and our work would make space for *all* your beloved people."

I don't remember any further prayers about sick aunts or new puppies, or grateful addicts in recovery, and Anna closed with the Lord's Prayer, having served her part well and ready to hand over the liturgist mantle to the communion officiant. I, being that officiant, had absorbed my initial shock and it had turned to rage.

I wasn't angry at him.

A switch flipped and Rick disappeared from my emotional horizon—all I saw were the shocked and defiant faces of the others in the room.

It wasn't about him.

The whole room was pulsing with shock and silent fury that this precious space had been torn open.

As I walked up to stand behind the table, I pulled together the fragments in my mind—how much I didn't want to do communion—to share bread in this space, when this space had been broken and betrayed.

How could I ask these faithful people to come eat at this table after that?

But—I was struck in that moment by how much one is not invited to make up new rules about communion simply because one feels the miserable weight of presiding at the table in the midst of rage. We are here at this table—it is not my table. It is not the church's table. It is not the table of my rage. It is not the table of my feelings.

The liturgy did its work and I began to weep the repeated words. Not the delicate, beatific weeping of Jesus icons in the garden, but the hot tears every woman from the South knows as the extrusion of full fury through the tiny windows of imaginable behavior.

So I said, through angry and resentful tears, the truth I had said over that table time after time, week after week—"This table isn't safe. Jesus was betrayed here and he blessed it anyway. We come here because we are hungry, because we are in need of family and hope and revolution. But the table has a cost. We have to bear the weight that others are invited—that they will be there too and we will eat the same bread they eat, right alongside them. You

are ALL invited to this table. It is not my table. It is not a Presbyterian table. It's not this church's table. It isn't mine to fence."

And so we went into the prayer, blessedly written out beforehand, and to the ancient words of institution—

> On the night Jesus was to be arrested, he was eating with his friends. Before the meal, he took bread, and giving thanks to God for it, he broke it, saying, "This is my body, broken for you. Every time you eat, remember me."
>
> In the same way, after supper, he took the cup, saying, "this is the cup of the new covenant, sealed in my blood for the forgiveness of every sin. Every time you drink, remember me."
>
> For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the saving death of our risen Lord until he comes again, to wipe away every tear from every eye, to bind up every broken heart, to welcome every last one of us home again.
>
> Friends this is the joyful feast of the people of God and it is set for you. We invite you to come, take a piece of bread that is larger than you think you deserve, bigger than you think you should receive—God's love for you, God's grace for you is more than you can imagine, so take a lot. Dip it into the juice, and return to your seat.
>
> Friends, come and receive.

And so they did come. They saw that he would come too and they came anyway. They didn't look angry or vengeful and he didn't look repentant or smug. They came and ate together. The rest of the service has evaporated from memory, but I do recall that immediately when the service ended, beloved Caty, the mother of three—one of whom, a daughter, had just

married her wife two weeks before, stood waiting to count the offering, completely crushed. She gave me a huge hug and I returned it, both of us sharing the grief of the whole damn experience. In the moment I thought I was comforting her—furious as I was that he would speak, even obliquely about her kid that way. It took me awhile to realize that Caty, and indeed the whole room had heard him speak ill of their pastors, and that had not been appreciated. Her anger was for me.

Looking back, it's hard to imagine what could have repaired the tear in that community space of prayer. If I'm honest, I think that even as it stung and did real damage, the reality of who that community is now was perhaps both named and strengthened by Anna's refusal to play by the narrow rules Rick tried to enforce. The community refused to be driven not only from the table but their sharing of it. The attempted realignment of worship, the coup of the man with the white hair and the "biblical values" wasn't shouted down—it just didn't factor here in the same way. I wish he had never said those things—but, perhaps, it is more accurate to say that I wish he had never thought them. I wish he had never been formed by the dualism they come from, the same binary energy that keeps men from therapists and healthy emotional lives and women from agency and respect and non-binary people in the closet and out of the history books. If they had only gone unsaid we would have been spared the pain in the moment—but perhaps we would not have known, especially the most vulnerable among us, that this is where we stand, and we would not have seen that this community refuse to let the holy be domesticated into judgements and binaries. Perhaps we would have remained a church community awaiting our tyrant, ready to allow bad behavior to show up and run the church into the ground.

Rick wanted that to be his mic drop moment, but we asked that he come back to our office after that to talk it through, and he did. He wouldn't say much, just that the disagreement stood and he didn't intend to come back to worship. We didn't give him the anger that he wanted and we let him go. Eventually, via email, he offered a limited apology for his tone and the setting of his comments, but made it clear he stood by his sentiment. Then, much later, he stopped me on the street. He was still in the habit of greeting the staff warmly, even as he didn't come by the church anymore. This time, he stopped me and very sincerely apologized. I don't think he came to agreement with our theology of celebration, or our way of being church—as those are related to one another in ways both obvious and not, but this time, I felt real regret. I felt him bearing the weight of the tear in a holy moment that action caused. He asked me to apologize to Anna and I said I would, though I knew he already had done so. I felt the weight of the weight he still felt. Anna said later that she had told him it was really ok. That she was ok, and we were ok, and he was forgiven.

I suppose what I really wish is that all that time afterward, he could imagine a world where he would neither be required to say that prayer at his friends and to his church for the sake of his faith, nor where he would have to continue apologizing for the same prayer over and over, never quite feeling like he had repented enough. I wish that he could have believed that he was still invited to eat with his friends without needing to judge them, and they would do the work and bear the cost of eating with him, if he would do the work and bear the cost of eating with them. I can't wish it didn't happen—at least not in this life, but I am still wishing for the restoration, where we learn to do the real work and make it to life together again on the other side.

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