

Trusting  
Romans 8: 31-35-37-38  
February 2, 2020  
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I was driving home from Wfff this week with Ruthie. I said to her, "I need to write a sermon tomorrow. This will be my last sermon at First UCC." "It had better be good." she said to me.

I first preached here February 19th, 2012, almost exactly 8 years ago. My time with you at First UCC has been incredibly meaningful to me, and the journey that led up to my ministry here has helped me appreciate all that you are as a congregation and all we have been able to do together.

I left seminary committed to rural and small town ministry. Sara and I moved to Southeast Wisconsin in 2003, and I started serving Plymouth UCC in Dodgeville.

I loved the work of pastoral ministry, and I loved the people. The church was doing great work. They became a volunteer base for a free health clinic that had started, and members started an ESL program for immigrants on dairy farms. They were small and mighty, but they were small. The congregation was in decline. One year, this congregation of 110 members had 11 funerals. That would be like our congregation having over 40 funerals in a year. We yoked with another UCC congregation down the road, I started working for them too. They were facing the same challenges in some even bigger ways.

I was pouring my heart out and congregation leaders were working hard, and it still felt like we were still being pushed backwards by forces beyond our control.

I only had so much endurance for that, and I was very discouraged. Many new pastors don't continue in ministry past their first few years out of seminary because of these challenges and more. I wondered if I was cut out for pastoral ministry. I wondered if there were any churches, in this time, that were able to create forward momentum.

I began the search process in the late fall and early winter of 2009. I was selective. I applied for an Associate position at an innovative church of a few thousand members in Omaha, NE. I was in the final 2, and wasn't selected. I was crushed. A year went by. A Senior Minister position at a church in Madison, WI opened. I applied, and advanced to the final 2, and wasn't selected. I was crushed. Another position opened in Ames, IA. I applied and didn't get an interview. At this point, I wasn't a pleasant person.

Then this position opened. I knew immediately that this was a better fit for me than any of the other congregations I'd been in conversation with. I thought, "Could God be so good to me that I could serve with this church in Northfield?" When I started, I had a lot of energy and excitement that had been penned up for a while. You took that energy and ran with it and you gave me your energy and ideas too, and I have truly treasured my time in ministry with you.

The first sermon I preached here was on the Transfiguration, (this spiritual revealing in the midst of Jesus ministry), and I haven't found the sermon because I'm bad at keeping files,

but I remember what I said. I said that I know that social justice ministry is important for this congregation. It's been an important part of this church's history, and it is what you are known for in the wider United Church of Christ. Social justice ministry is important to me too.

But, for our social justice ministry to grow, for this fruit to appear, our faith will need to deepen like roots pushing deep into the soil. If our witness in the world is to become stronger, our spirituality will need exercise. If we as a UCC congregation are going to be something more than the platform of the Democratic party with a little holy water sprinkled on it, we will need to give energy to the central disciplines of the faith.

Of course, the ministry we have done with ISAIAH MN and the way we are engaging political systems along with other Christians and Muslims is work I'm very proud of. I'm proud of the work Pastor Abby did in creating a safe space for LGBTQ youth, and the way she started OWL and it's continuation with Pastor Lauren. I'm proud of solar panels and our OCWM giving and our outward focused work, but I'm also proud of our small group ministry Connect and the faith discussions that happen there. I'm proud of the way we have worshipped together in the morning and in the evening. I'm proud of who we have been not just as a community, but as a faith community. I believe that sending our roots deep into the soil has born fruit.

In the book, *The Heart of Christianity*, by Scholar Marcus Borg, who had his start at Carleton, of course, speaks of a few different types of faith. One type of faith is faith as belief. In this approach, Christianity is about whether you believe the right things or not. I think this is the most common understanding of the faith. Do we believe in the resurrection, that Jesus is the Son of God, in the virgin birth, the list goes on and on. A faith like this can trip people up as we seek to hold ancient faith together with all we know about the modern world. This approach to the faith tripped me up, to the point that I went to seminary to try to figure out if I could still be a Christian with all of my questions and doubt.

But there's another way, according to Borg, and that is faith as trust.

In this approach, the opposite of faith isn't doubt. It isn't about believing or the mind. The opposite of this kind of faith is anxiety, fear, or worry. This type of faith is a matter of the heart. "Where are we placing our trust?" We all place our trust somewhere. Are we placing our trust in what is ultimate? Are we placing our trust in what has transformative and redemptive power? Are we placing our trust in love?

It's here that we start connecting with the faith questions of our ancestors, where we start linking our experience with theirs. They weren't really asking questions about belief, but they were asking questions about whether God, this love, was trustworthy. They asked this question in slavery in Egypt, they asked this question in the wilderness, they asked this question in exile, they asked this question those three long days after crucifixion, they asked this question as the early church when they were being persecuted. And all the stories, miraculous and otherwise that we may have trouble getting our minds around are simply an affirmation of the love of God. Over and over again, the response is yes, "God liberates from slavery, God leads us through the wilderness, God brings us home from exile, God brings new life even from death." Yes, this love is trustworthy. Surrender, let go, try living in this story and see what happens.

Paul's words from the 8th chapter of Romans articulate this faith. These are the words I come back to again and again. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. Nothing in life can do it, death can't do it either. If God is for us, who is against us? So maybe I can let go of some of this fear.

Since I've been in ministry with you, I hope our faith as a community has grown, and I know that mine has. My roots have dug deeper into the soil. Fear has been a powerful companion on my journey. I've shared that I had some experiences where I was bullied as a child and those moments had a powerful impact on me. I pull in to be safe, and at the same time the Spirit keeps pulling me outward. But I've felt like fear has been loosening its grip.

You have given me the space and encouragement to try things, to risk, to fail, to try again. These have been Some of our experiments have worked and some have failed. I think these have been important lessons for us as a church, but they've been important lessons for me.

As I've been following the leading of the Spirit, I've gotten myself into things that I doubted I would have the courage to do. And I've discovered unexpected grace along the way as I've trusted, as I've allowed love to show how it might be trustworthy. What I will be doing next, I would not be doing if I weren't a person of faith. It isn't just that my faith values are driving me into the political realm, its that I wouldn't have found the courage to make these choices and decisions if it hadn't been for a faith practice that has been changing me, in the midst of a faith community that has been changing me.

Week after week this story we practice has been washing over me. I've been discovering more and more ways that this love is trustworthy.

I'm grateful for this beautiful stretch of the journey that I have been blessed to spend with you. I'm grateful to the search committee for taking a chance on me. I've been grateful to be able to work with such a talented staff, our office staff is great, our music staff is so much fun to work with. I have enjoyed serving with three very different pastors. The Rev. Dr. Bob Griggs helped me transition into ministry here. I couldn't have had a more supportive colleague as I began. I leaned on his wisdom, endured his jokes, relied on his insight and still do.

I'm grateful to Pastor Abby. We grew together in our ministry, relied on different gifts and skills, fit them together and discovered how much fun good collaboration can be. Abby added so much to the ministry I was doing and hopefully I added to her work as well.

When we hired Pastor Lauren, we knew we needed a generalist, and wow, did we ever. Lauren has done a little bit of everything and a lot of many things. When you work with colleagues you notice the strengths they have that you don't have. You notice the things they see immediately that take you longer to figure out. Lauren has gifts for this time of transition that have already been serving you well and will continue to do so. She has also been a helpful colleague as I have been sorting out what has been changing in me. I know she will serving you well as you move forward.

I have learned so much from all of you, and what we've done together will be going with me as my next chapter begins. As my wife Sara said so eloquently on Thursday evening, our family thanks you too. You have been so good to all of us.

It is now time for a different Senior Minister with different gifts and skills to be in ministry with you. Just as I was eagerly waiting for a church like First UCC to serve, there are pastors who are just waiting for an opportunity to serve with a faith community like you.

As we both begin a new chapter, touched by grief, and grace, and new things seen and unseen, may we trust that a love that goes with us that is present and powerful, able to heal and transform. Nothing will separate us from it.

Thank you, and thanks be to God.