

Trust in the Midst of Change
Psalm 46
November 17, 201
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I want to begin by acknowledging the feelings that may be with us today. Many of you have reached out and gracious and kind to me, and to my family. You have also expressed your sadness, and I have my sadness too. I imagine there are also some feelings of frustration and hurt, some anger, some anxiety about what is next for First UCC, since it has been a tumultuous year. Whatever mixture of feelings you may have, that's ok.

I'll do some explaining for a while, and I'll do a little preaching at the end.

I first shared with you, nearly two years ago, that I was interested in running for office. We live out a faith with values that have so much to add to our politics, in a time a great need. I shared this after a great deal of discernment, realizing that this journey felt very similar to my journey into ordained ministry. I wanted to continue with you as your Senior Minister, if elected, but it would mean a change to being a Senior Minister who was really only present $\frac{2}{3}$ of the year. One of the first questions that came up was, "is it possible for First UCC to thrive with a part-time Senior Minister?" I said, "that's an open question. It's a question I have too."

I knew you hadn't called me to this arrangement. When you are in the search process as a congregation and you put together your profile, there is a question that asks, "is this a bi-vocational position? Yes or no. First UCC checked no. This is a full-time position. We will take all the energy you've got! When I started here, I was ready to give all my energy and I did.

We had also made important changes to our governance structure as a church. These are changes I deeply believe in, changes that have contributed to the strength and vitality of our ministry. The governance structure we put in place assumes a full-time Senior Minister, and I didn't want to roll back those changes in any way.

I still felt led to run for office, that I needed to give this a try. We agreed to enter into this experiment together and we put a new staffing structure in place that we were planning to evaluate.

During that time I had a conversation with a member who has taught me a lot, and was one of the people I would often turn to with leadership related questions. This person said to me, "I support you. I support this experiment. I can see what you are doing and why. And, I think we will discover that we can't have a part-time Senior Minister for long." That is a statement I have carried with me the last two years.

As I was preparing to announce that I was running for office, and we were putting our staffing plan in place, I told you that I cared about First UCC's ministry and I wanted that ministry to remain strong. Behind that statement was a realization that if I couldn't do what was needed for First UCC's ministries to continue to move forward, or if the realities of this dual role were a burden on the church, I would need to make a change.

It's clear to me that the realities of my part-time Senior Minister role stress the systems of this congregation. It adds stress to the Governance Structure, the spine of our ministries.

It adds stress to staff. This summer and fall as I have been out of session, I still have some legislative responsibilities. And managing staff and overseeing the ministry of a congregation take time. We can still manage, but I don't have as much time to be present, to answer questions, to follow up on something, to take something on and drive it to completion.

A staffing model that we hoped was going to be a good fit for Pastor Abby, giving her some new challenges that fit with her gifts, and would extend her tenure with us, turned out not to be a good fit. This was a big change. It was complicated. It was one of a variety of factors that led to her departure.

Abby's leaving was sad for us as a church, and it was sad for me. This was not what I hoped for, for her, or for us.

Our Sanctuary ministry is another example. Our Sanctuary initiative was very complicated on its own, as things were. Add in my role as a State Legislator and not always being present added another layer of difficulty, more complex questions.

The listening sessions we had as a congregation in July were very difficult for me to sit through. Not because of anything anyone said, truly. All the questions raised were questions I was asking too, the questions were completely fair. Nothing said was a surprise to me. I also heard the support for and the enthusiasm for the experiment we were in. But the reality of facing a pastoral search in this staffing model was extremely complex, and it created confusion. A pastoral transition is hard enough. The two roles I'm holding together made it more difficult.

I left those sessions with a sense of urgency. I needed to figure out if continuing in this part-time role was good for us, how much longer it would be good for us, or if the weight of it was too heavy. I didn't want to make any rash decisions, but I could feel how my heart was increasingly drawn to political work. As a legislator, I was in conversations I had been wanting to be in for a long time, conversations that impact the health of small communities and rural areas, health care and long term care, equity, our impact on the environment and the climate, conversations about how we build a movement that is inclusive and to achieve the things we need to get done. I knew I would need to decide between these two vocations at some point, but I began wondering if now was the time for me to step away from being the Senior Minister here and from pastoral ministry in general. This was a big decision, stepping away from a community I love and work I love. I began coming to terms with this and grieving the possibility of this change.

As the search for an Interim Congregational Minister continued, I became increasingly unsettled. I didn't want the church to go through a year or two more of expending energy to figure out how to accommodate a part-time Senior minister, and I was concerned about eventually calling a permanent person into this staffing model. It's a complicated, unusual model. It could be a tough sell. I didn't think this path was a good one.

I kept hearing this song on the radio, on 89.3 the Current, the soundtrack of my life. This song was on every time I got in the car. with the chorus, "tell the truth to yourself, and the rest will fall in place. Tell the truth to yourself, and the rest will fall in place..." The truth is that my call is drawing me deeper into political work, and this shift has been underway for a while. The truth is, as difficult as it will be for me to leave being in ministry with you, First UCC needs to

have a full time Senior Minister again, someone who will bring new energy, new ideas, and new gifts and will love being in ministry with you as I have.

There is other work I'll be stepping into. I'll be working with an organization that is a place of collaboration of people's organizations in Midwestern states, organizations like ISIAH MN. I'll share what is happening in Minnesota and bring back what is going well in other states. I'll also work with other elected officials and candidates who have emerged out of these movements. I'll add my energy to the progressive movement. I'm excited about this work and think it is a good next step for me.

Regardless of what happens with political work that is next for me, I will always be grateful to you. You are a vital and resilient congregation who took a risk by helping me try this out. You took this experiment on as a new way of sending our congregation's values into our state. I hope I have done this work true to the best our faith has to offer. I also know that this change has come with consequences for our church, and I'm sorry for the pain that has been caused.

Our scripture for today, Psalm 46, is an affirmation of trust in God in the midst of change. It is a Psalm I have been holding tightly to, and I invite you to do the same. The Psalmist speaks of the mountains shaking in the heart of the sea. What the Psalmist is speaking of is more than an earthquake. In the worldview of the ancient near east, the mountains anchored the dry land in the midst of the waters, and they were the pillars that held up the sky. The worst thing that could happen was for the mountains to shake. This would allow the waters of chaos to break through from underneath and the sky to fall at the same time. The Psalmist is

articulating the fear of the whole world falling to pieces. That's what change and loss can feel like, the world as we know it falling away.

Psalm 46, though, proclaims that even when the world as we know it is falling away, God is there. This love of God is what is most powerful and ultimate. This love of God is bigger than the biggest changes, and this love of God will not be moved. This love of God is for us. It's with us. This love of God is to be trusted.

I invite us to place our trust in this love. The love of God is here in this church. It is here in your relationships with one another. It is here in the leadership of the Council that is already serving you well in this transition. It is here in the ministry of the conference as it will support us in this change. It is here in the ministry of Pastor Lauren who has been a rock this past year . She has been like glue, and she is uniquely equipped to minister to you and with you in this time of change. The love of God is here in song and prayer and in the sacred story the church carries. This love of God is here and will not be moved.

There is more to say and there's time to have the conversations we need to have. I'll have more to say about this later, but I want you to know that I have been so proud to be the Senior Minister here.

I invite us to hold onto the assurance of our scriptures. We do not need to fear in times of change. We are invited to trust the love of God in times of change. We are invited to trust that the love of God is in this place and will not be moved. Amen.

