

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF BURLINGTON, UCC

“Look Up At the Stars”

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Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. Abraham, part of the legacy of a comfortable wealthy family, sleeps happily. He wakes up from his dream, his vision, and wakes Sarah up. They walk outside as Abraham shares the Word of God with Sarah. He looks to heaven in infinite wonder in awe of the incalculable numbers of people who will be the future that God has planned for them, God’s kin-dom.

The kin-dom. The society that God envisions, a community of inclusivity offering connection and hope. Not dictated by containers of wealth, gender, or ability.

This news that she will bear a child hits Sarah differently. This news may have complex or bewildered Sarah as she joined Abraham for his late-night frolic. In Genesis 18, she even laughs when she hears this news herself. Is she laughing at the impossibility of having children at 90 or is this to cope with grief?

The Ancient World looks down on Sarah’s empty nest. Abraham may even make fun of or ignore Sarah. To be barren is to be disabled at this time. Sarah is considered one of the first people with a disability.

I do not have the ability to sit down with Sarah and ask why she laughs. I am unsure if she is in grief over the disability, if she is blaming herself, if she is blaming God. Abraham counts the stars; Sarah finds the news inconceivable. It is no different from 4000 years ago to 2019 – what one would understand as a disability is different from what another person understands a disability as.

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I look toward the heaven and count the stars. I am unable to count them all myself. They seem as infinite to me as Abraham sees them and sometimes as unattainable to me as Sarah experiences.

It is 2013 and I look toward First Church on a Tuesday Evening. I leave a meeting from the First Unitarian Universalist Society where I have been attending. I start attending Wednesday Morning Bible Study at First Church. I love the Unitarian Universalist church, but I am aware how meaningful my connection to the Christian faith is. After an interlude as “done” - as in not attending church I begin to look for more. The First Church is the only church that responds back to my inquiry on the acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals.

I find a community that accepts me.

I find, early on in this community, a ministry I have done through my life – Advocating for People with Disabilities.

It is 2014 and after some encouragement from Adrienne Carr I apply, and receive a call, to serve on the United Church of Christ Disabilities Ministries. UCC Disabilities Ministries is a national board that supplies recommendations to national staff, conferences, associations, and local churches. We encourage congregations to go through a process called Accessible to All. Much like the Opening and Affirming certification, this certification requires churches to take an intentional look on accessibility not just as a physical building. The whole life of the church is for the whole congregation. It is not unusual for a physical church to be a barrier as the Americans with Disabilities Act does not apply to religious institutions.

As part of my role I often travel. Networking brings visibility to the ministry. I look toward the heaven when I travel. To look up to the heaven is to recognize that I need to have the same faith that Abraham had when God spoke to Abraham's abilities. I experience doubt that Sarah feels.

Barriers to my participation on the board is created by manufactured barriers. It is me laughing at a suggestion, avoiding it, that creates barriers to ministry.

On my first trip I make a plan for flying. I arrive at the airport hours early as I never have flown out of Burlington before. I make it through TSA. I find my gate, an hour to spare, I sit there anxiously. Ticket in hand, I board the plane with my boarding group, and find my seat.

I am overstimulated within five minutes.

I put on my headphones, at the beginning of take-off, and Natalie Merchant's song "Wonder" comes through my earbuds, "They say I must be one of the wonders of God's own creation and as far as they see, they can offer no explanation." Natalie's wisdom enters my ears as we climb up to the heavens. I realize I am buying into that "people see me I'm a challenge to [their] balance."

The plane lands in D.C., I find my next gate and I check email. I read my email from my mother. She says:

Honey,
I am so proud of you. Do not let the turkeys get you down.
Love You
Mommy.

Most parents are proud of their children. My mother is proud of me in this moment. As a person who has Asperger Syndrome and is on the autistic spectrum, I am achieving goals that teachers have said I would never achieve. I read this on my phone screen, and I look at the ticket counter in front of my gate, and I sigh. I walk up to the ticket counter asking to pre-board. No matter how quietly I try to tell the gate check person I have autism I know others are listening. I sit back down in my chair hearing, "Gate 30 is now boarding to Burlington, Vermont. Gate 30 is now boarding all passengers to Burlington, VT". As I look down the hall, I see Gate 30.

And then I hear a voice.

I hear a feminine voice, “You need to keep moving forward”, the voice says.

I wonder, is this my still small voice? Has the inaudible voice of God turned audible?

Will D.C. be the place where I will be like Abraham and experience a vision on my ministry?

While I reach for my phone, to confirm this with my spiritual director, I see a lady sitting next to me and she repeats “You need to keep moving forward.” She has heard me ask for the accommodation and recognizing doubt on my face gave me additional encouragement.

As Natalie would put it “Ooo, I believe, fate, fate smiled”.

God is in the world. I am speaking to a reflection of God.

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In other airports the barrier is the airport itself.

As part of work for the board I attend General Synods. General Synod is the national gathering that happens every two years.

This June I had a layover in Detroit.

Pre-boarding in Vermont, the plane attendant asks if I need a wheelchair once I reach Detroit.

This is not my first time in a wheelchair at an airport.

I move forward and I accept the wheelchair. I am flying to Synod. This year the Self-Care Suite is launching. An initiative birthed by me, with support from the national Minister on Disabilities and Mental Health Justice Rev. Dr. Sarah Lund. The Self-Care Suite is a place at the conference that allows individuals to retreat for silence and grounding. It allows for naps, to listen to music quietly with earbuds, to crawl under weighted blankets, and distribution of prayer shawls.

In the late evening, the night before Synod, I walk back to my hotel. I look up at the heaven and see the multitude of stars in the sky. Unique, different, and more than I can count. I stop and pray that it is reflective of the attendees of Synod.

We want people to come as who they are for self-care. Ministers and laity, abled-bodied and disabled, straight and LGBTQ. I want to talk to people where they are.

After leaving a shift at the Self-Care Suite I see someone sitting nearby, we will call her Ann. Ann is part of the UCC’s Faithful and Welcoming movement. The Faithful & Welcoming movement is a group of UCC churches who identify as evangelical, conservative, orthodox, or traditional. The Movement embraces traditional orthodoxy. It also embraces the historical definition of marriage. They do not support ministers who identify as LGBTQ in their churches.

I introduce myself and ask how Ann is doing. I acknowledge it is stressful for her while I wear a “God Gave Me Sexuality” pin. It is visible, she smiles, agree that it is a stressful Synod.

This synod is stressful. A resolution, infamously now known as “Committee Eight” is on the floor. Committee Eight, if it passes, will bar the Faithful and Welcoming movement from the Exhibit Hall. Ann and I are practicing how we define “welcome”.

It is not about me in this moment. I know who I am. I am someone who loves everyone. I am someone who loves more than one person, who loves personalities, who loves people. I do not know who Ann is. This is her time. This is a human connection. This two people, both in ministry, walking the path together.

I ask her questions about her ministry and what that means to her.

When I sense it is time to move on, she asks if I would pray with her.

Then says, “Can you lead us in prayer?”

I have no words to describe what I was thinking. I was like Sarah when she heard God speak about her giving birth. Caught off-guard.

My prayer is of Thanksgiving. I thank God that we have an awesome responsibility of freewill. I thank God that we can debate and to be in fellowship with one another as the body of Christ where we are all welcome. I thank God that I can speak to those who lead me to explore my own beliefs.

I thank her for her time, wish her a good Synod. I get up from the bench and I hear “hold on”. She asks me for a hug.

I say yes and at that moment I connect.

I am speaking to and hugging a reflection of God.

I connect with Ann through social media. I receive a message as I ponder this conversation, as Abraham ponders the stars, and the person about ponders differently thinking and different theologies. She is relating not just to their own kind but those from various places. She is openly welcoming old friends back into their life. She has welcomed me into her life, as a new friend, and we still are in contact.

36 hours after Synod I am in front of the hotel at 4 AM preparing fly home. The conference center is across the street, the UCC street flags still on light poles. I am waiting to go to the airport. I stand near the road looking up towards the heavens. There are far too many stars to count. There is not a container large enough to hold them and the container does not serve justice to the uniqueness of the nations, or the diversity of God’s people.