McCORMICK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

A RECOGNIZED AND RECOGNIZABLE BAPTISMAL IDENTITY

A THESIS IN THE PRACTICE OF MINISTRY

by
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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS
May 2016
**Abstract**

The baptismal liturgy proclaims God’s promises of covenant relationship, invites parents to promise to teach Christian faith to their child, and urges the congregation to vow to guide and nurture the newly baptized in their midst. Parental participation pairs with intergenerational mentoring to form a web of relationships where baptismal identity can flourish. Yet, the espoused values of promise within the orderly world of baptism are met by the reality of chaos and struggle in human life. A year of exploring baptism within the congregational context sought to bridge the gap (Heifetz) between the espoused values of promise and the lived reality of chaos. When trying to impact the value-reality gap, making time for God-in-community was the chief impediment to baptismal identity, and active compassionate intergenerational participation became the ecclesial imperative.

Because baptism is the beginning of a child’s *growing up in God* (Smith), this project reorients baptism in Genesis chapter one, where God’s creative spirit hovers over the watery primordial chaos *in the beginning*. The poetry of Genesis 1:2 offers a launching point to explore the chaos that permeates existence, both binding up the congregation and tearing it asunder. Research in the social, ecclesial and theological context of baptism meets research in the binding power of promises, liturgy, intergenerational storytelling and ritual to articulate how post-baptismal rituals break down the value-reality gap and renew baptismal identity.

This project used narrative inquiry to collect, curate and evaluate the practices of living into baptismal promises by inviting children and adults to engage in (1) education and imagining (2) liturgy and storytelling, and (3) community reflection and action. The congregation’s baptismal identity was most recognized and recognizable at the corner of joy and sorrow, where compassionate participation in the baptismal promises enacted a *love that bears with the chaos* (Keller).
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the beginning of time,
your Spirit moved over the watery chaos,
calling forth order and life.

_The Prayer over the Water, Baptismal Liturgy_

To those I love, to those who have been on this journey through the waters of baptism: You have been with me in the timeless echo of God’s presence hovering over the water. For skipping Petoskey stones off Lake Michigan, or endless hours of creek stomping at Rock Creek, Sugar Creek, Briar Creek and beyond. For one more walk around the Flowing Well or Montrose Harbor. For liminal journeys under an easy yoke across Lake Sawbill, Seagull and Saginaw. For the sacred work of stacking cinder-blocks or digging holes or moving debris at Edisto or Back Bay or All Saints or Sumpango. For one more theological quandary to ponder, one more pastoral emergency to debrief, one more calling to reaffirm. Thank you.

May God meet you at water’s edge, now and forever from now.
Ministers at Kenilworth Union Church have presided over the baptism of nearly three thousand people since the church’s founding in 1892. In practice, the congregation is sacramentally rooted in baptism, but does it live out the promises made at the font? In the baptismal liturgy, parents and congregation both make promises to the child being baptized. Parents promise to teach the Christian faith to their child. The congregation promises to guide and nurture this child in their midst. Given such a liturgy, does the congregation offer unmistakable evidence of these promises to each child being baptized?

As the pastor for children and youth ministries, it is no accident that I would be drawn to baptism; my ministry with a child often begins when parents decide to bring their child forward for baptism. While baptism is often the first time a child enters the sanctuary, it does not need to be the last. Similarly, no child, youth or adult who enters the church should walk alone on his or her faith journey. Put another way, the congregation has made baptismal promises at the font to guide and nurture one another in Christian community, and so they should.

To set the scene more clearly, baptism data shows that more than half – or fifteen hundred – of the baptisms at Kenilworth Union occurred in the twenty years between 1985-2005 during a period of leadership stability and population growth. The booming cohort of infants baptized in 1985 are now turning thirty, and some are bringing their own children forward for baptism, while others – in sync with national trends among the millennial generation – are opting out of church participation all together. The youngest from that era are now turning ten, just beginning the long climb toward adulthood, and some are in families who do not make time for congregational participation – worship, Sunday school or otherwise. What practices might make a difference in renewing the baptismal identity of emerging generations, while strengthening the partnership between all generations of baptized Christians? What might foster lifelong
compassionate participation in congregational life? What might allow people of all ages to wear their baptismal identity as God’s beloved like a precious garment instead of just one more outgrown outfit on its way to the rummage sale?

While baptismal identity is often rooted in Jesus’ baptism at the Jordan, or Christ’s post-resurrection great commission on the mountain in Galilee, because this research stems from the promises made in the baptismal liturgy, it seems prudent to begin with Genesis chapter one. This passage is given prominence in the pedagogical kerygmatic liturgy, the liturgy that teaches and proclaims the gospel story. Baptism teaches the gospel through the “Prayer of Thanksgiving over the Water,” identifying God’s presence hovering over the water in the beginning and subsequently throughout salvation history. Reorienting baptismal identity in the rhythmic poetry of Genesis chapter one illuminates God as the One who hovered over the primordial waters in the beginning, speaking life into the deep watery chaos.

The primordial chaos out of which God creates is akin to the chaotic places in modern day life. A Genesis one reorientation to baptism uniquely speaks God’s mystery into the enduring chaos of the congregational context, where multiple narratives take root. Baptism invites a multi-vocal – or heteroglossial – conversation at the intersection of one’s own life story, the community’s story, and the kerygmatic sacred story.

**Narrative Inquiry: Wakefully Drawing Together Baptismal Stories**

In the case of exploring baptism at Kenilworth Union, the narrative inquiry research method has been uniquely able tug at the interwoven threads of a heteroglossial baptismal dialogue that is at once personal and communal, spoken and visual, experiential and scriptural. Narrative inquiry wakefully draws together the baptismal narratives that best evoke the joys and challenges, triumphs and stumbling blocks of living into the promises made at the font. The
narratives collected in this project highlight baptismal identity. Telling and retelling these baptismal narratives further develop baptismal identity, because narrative itself embeds the world with meaning instead of attending to a merely scientific description of the world. In this way, the narratives collected, curated and evaluated in this research project articulate a recognized and recognizable baptismal identity within dual realities: the mystery of God’s grace in the sacrament of baptism and the flawed yet fervent human response.

With “experience as the driving impulse” this year of encountering baptism at Kenilworth Union was intentionally intergenerational and multisensory, participative and symbolic, shared and personal. The congregation heard sermons, lectures and liturgies about baptism; nineteen children were baptized in the midst of the congregation; members submitted photos and stories of their own baptism or that of their child; families collected water from sacred watering holes around the world, evoking memory and conversation about baptism; parents of those soon to be confirmed were offered formal ways to tell their child’s baptism story; preschoolers sang and explored stories about baptism; middle school students played games that related to baptism; and youth participating in mission learned about baptism globally, exchanging baptism stories with Guatemalan Pentecostals. In the same way that one shakes or agitates a Polaroid picture in order for the image to be revealed, this project shook up and agitated the congregation about baptism for a year in order for baptismal identity to be revealed.

Not every narrative can be told, nor would that be interesting or helpful. Instead, the stories that are told reveal that within liturgically narrated divine mystery and human chaos, baptismal promises, and by extension baptismal identity, is most recognized and recognizable in the divine and dusty church at the corner of joy and sorrow, where one can compassionately participate in an active love that bears with the chaos. The enduring challenge of such an
identity is maintaining a matrix of post-baptismal rituals that offer a *deeper growing up in God*, and bridge the gap between promises made and promises enacted.8

**Baptism and Theology: Seeking God in Enduring Chaos**

Baptism begins *in the beginning*.9 At Kenilworth Union, baptism often transpires *in the beginning*, in the first months of an infant’s life. In scripture, the sacred story begins *in the beginning*, with a primordial image of baptism: God’s Spirit hovering over the face of the waters. Yet, even *in the beginning*, before there is water, there is chaos. This is not just the often joyful chaos of bearing a child into the world, but also the scriptural chaos that unfolds *in the beginning* prior to God’s windy spirit sweeping over the water. First, Genesis 1:2 invokes *tohu va vohu*, an uninhabitable chaos, a formlessness, an unformed mess, or what Augustine calls the *nothingsomething*.10 The ancient priestly communities who authored this creation account poetically, even liturgically, imagine God as the one who undoes the *tohu* and *vohu*, speaking life into creation.11 This cosmology of antiquity envisions God speaking life, not *ex nihilo*, but into a primordial turbulence that has substance yet not form.12 Into this *tohu va vohu*, God’s voice loosened the darkness calling out ‘let there be light.’13 The light shines in the darkness, and God calls it good.14 In this divine speech, God forms life from chaos, commanding sunrise and moonrise, naming the threshold between land and lake, and bellowing the cacophony of creation.15

A year of studying baptism *in situ* revealed this enduring relationship between water and chaos. In baptism, God is invited into the chaos of existence, the heartbreak and hardship, to utter meaning into what might otherwise be a formlessness *nothingsomething*. In baptism, ordinary humans call on God to order their messy lives and cajole them toward good. In baptism, individuals soak in God’s story of grace in an ungraceful world. In baptism, mothers and fathers
admit that the world into which sons and daughters are born can be cruel and indifferent, and in the presence of God and community, they vow to journey with their child through the muck.

_Tohu va vohu_ is the tug that calls kith and kin to seek out God at the font. _Tohu va vohu_ is the somber chaos of cancer creeping into another life, and the sad hushed conversation about a miscarriage or a teen suicide attempt. It is what leaves men and women homeless, helpless or hurting. It is global poverty, drought and abuse. _Tohu va vohu_ is what causes prophets to plead, “care for the orphans and the widows and the strangers,” and “do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.” In the parish context, in response to such unmitigated mayhem, neighbors and friends gather together in holy places to seek out the One who puts chaos behind bars, the One who sweeps over the waters, the One who was in the beginning, is now and always will be.

The baptism liturgy pedagogically invites participants to imagine God’s voice thundering over the waters of such _tohu va vohu_. The baptismal prayers proclaim that within chaos, God is “brooding over the waters of creation’s birth” ushering all creation into life. The “Prayer over the Waters” of baptism kerygmatically tells the wide story of God’s salvation through the water, beginning _in the beginning_ and cascading across the story of Noah’s salvation from the flood, following the easterly winds as Moses crosses the sea from slavery to freedom, praising God for covenant faithfulness from Abraham to David, remembering Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River, giving thanks for Jesus’ death and resurrection, and welcoming the presence of the Holy Spirit who makes water a sign and seal of redemption and rebirth for the gathered community.

God is made known at riverbank and font, not just because Jesus said, “go baptize” but because, as Tertullian claims, God’s Spirit hovered over the waters, making sacred all water. The water is a resting place for God. Water has “a power of its own,” making it well suited to
“become the bearer of sacral power,” as Paul Tillich insists, offering an invitation into life with
god.\textsuperscript{22} God is present at the water’s edge. Water and word become the “visible enactment of the
invisible cosmos gathered around the throne of God.”\textsuperscript{23} God is made known in the watery
mystery of baptism.

Even so, baptism is no mere “magical bath.”\textsuperscript{24} Instead, the ancient practice of baptism – a
mingling of water and Holy Spirit – does not just offer unity with God, but binds people to one
another across time and place, and calls the Christian community to a common Christ-like ethic
and practice. In that way, baptism ushers in a new lifelong identity and a “new ethical
orientation” that fashions a dusty trail alongside Christ down the way of suffering and
solidarity.\textsuperscript{25} While the grace of God received in baptism is a gift freely given, the promise of
baptism precipitates a lifelong “growing up in God.”\textsuperscript{26} These promises are renewed and lived out
– whether carelessly or rigorously – in the midst of the chaotic human community, an
intermingling of human flourishing and imperfection.

The stories that follow are rooted in this Genesis one theological orientation to baptism,
articulating baptism as a lifelong growing up in God seen most clearly at Kenilworth Union in a
communal baptismal identity at the corner of joy and sorrow where compassionate participation
enacts a love that bears with the \textit{tohu va vohu} of life.

\textbf{Story One: Baptismal Identity – Promise as a Response to Chaos}

Over much too short a period of time, at least a dozen young people from the Kenilworth
Union community were hospitalized after a suicide attempt or ideation. Each hospitalization is
unique to the individual, but over many years of working with youth, some patterns arise. Often,
despite parental pleading, some youth do not welcome pastoral visits nor darken the church’s
doors. For others, the church might remain a source of comfort for the parents, but the child in
distress refuses any such *balm in Gilead*. For some, after hospitalization, there is a chance to return to church participation briefly before enrolling in a residential mental health treatment center. Regularly, students who were active before hospitalization desperately want to be with their church friends, but the contrast between the community’s joy and the student’s own sorrow is too dissonant to bear.

These narratives are not uncommon in New Trier township, a wealthy, commanding community on the North Shore of Chicago’s Cook County where Kenilworth Union is located. One school social worker estimated that ten percent of students enroll in residential mental health facilities during their high school career, and another reported an uptick in students too depressed or anxious to attend class. Even the Illinois Board of Education reported an increased demand for therapeutic boarding schools attended by students in social-emotional distress. In this highly affluent context, where one might expect young people to be well-adjusted, smart, talented and driven, nationwide research shows that youth in elite townships like New Trier show “unusually high rates of dysfunction” and “clinically significant depression, anxiety or delinquent behaviors at a rate two to three times the national average.”

The social-emotional distress of young people has long been embedded in the Kenilworth Union community memory. Thirty years earlier, Alison Tobey Smart, a college freshman from the congregation, came home for a holiday weekend and took her own life. Since then, a memorial fund in Alison’s memory has been dedicated to reducing suicide and suicide attempts through programs focused on depression, substance abuse, self-worth and human resilience. Those who serve on this Alison Tobey Smart Memorial Fund committee (ATS committee) gather with a shared vulnerability and helplessness in the face of Alison’s death and all those who suffer like she did. Surprisingly, this does not produce despair, but elicits a deeper
spiritual commitment in each committee member – a renewal of their calling to love God and neighbor. Rooted in that active, participative work together, they candidly, sometimes tearfully, often joyfully, understand that the work they do is a matter of life and death.

It is difficult to ignore such pressing realities – depression and suicide break the hearts of whole families and communities – but what does it have to do with baptism? The first ATS committee meeting of the year was on Sunday after worship on Baptism of the Lord Day, when an infant, Jordan, was baptized. In worship, the congregation had just shared in a classic image of baptism: parents passing a cooing baby in white to a pastor in robes, followed by prayers and a generous amount of water. The congregation was asked to stand and affirm, “Do you, as members and friends of the church, promise to guide and nurture this child by word and deed, with love and prayer, encouraging him to know and follow Christ and to be a faithful Christian?” Everyone pledged a hearty, “we do.”

Would the congregation live into the promises they made to Jordan? Literature on the philosophy of promise-making reveals that promises are weighty and demanding. Theoretically, promises have the ability to take on a special kind of power that “invokes obligation” by their very utterance. Socially and culturally, the practice of promise is beneficial, making “trust-based cooperation possible.” Theologically, promises are a communal commitment “of renewed life” in the face of tohu va vohu, or even the “dark abyss.” Biblically, as Martin Luther argues, “there is only one faith and one God – the One who makes promises.” Would the promises made to Jordan take on this sense of obligation, trust and commitment to renewed life, seeking our God of promise with him?

After worship on the day of Jordan’s baptism, the ATS committee gathered. I began the meeting by wondering aloud with the committee, “is the work we do together – building
resiliency in teenagers, destigmatizing mental health care, and confidently seeking to notice and understand suicide risk factors at all connected to this sacramental act we just participated in, namely baptism?” Overwhelmingly, the answer was, “yes.” At this vital intersection between despair and fearless love, there was a tangible expression of the baptismal promises. Their participation in such heartrending work manifested the promises made to them – the committee members – by God, while allowing them to embody the promises made by them at the font, particularly the promises made to children and youth. At the meeting place of vulnerability and hope, life and death, there was a recognized and recognizable baptismal identity.

This story embodies a central vision for a congregational baptismal identity: children and youth need unmistakable evidence that the adults in the congregation, not just their parents, take seriously the baptismal promises. Kenilworth Union has shown, through this narrative and others, that the congregation embodies a baptismal identity best when confronted with deepest sorrow. The adults on the ATS committee work with and for young people, offering that tangible unmistakable evidence by participating, not because it is superficially “a good Christian thing to do,” but because in seeking the mystery of God-who-hovers-over-chaos, their own baptismal identity compassionately obligates them to live into the baptismal promises made to others who stand at that same corner of joy and sorrow. They embody a commitment toward renewed life in the face of tohu va vohu.

**Story Two: The Value-Reality Gap between Promise and Chaos**

In the months since Jordan’s baptism, many more have been baptized. On the first Sunday in May, I sat with a dozen youth during worship and experienced their delight – a physical, visceral joy – as we witnessed two infants being presented at the font, held, prayed over, and baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The youth stood and answered
confidently when it came time for the congregational questions, and sat up expectantly as the presiding pastor walked the chattering, wiggling babies past them. These are the youth who have been active in Sunday school, youth groups and music ministries, the ones leaders can count on to know their Bible stories, and who surprise mentors by proclaiming those stories into one another’s life with depth and candor.

In some ways, this cohort is unique and their sustained participation is unmatched by any other group. It was no accident that a cluster of engaged youth was present in worship that day. Each of their parents, when asked at their own child’s baptism, “relying on God’s grace, do you promise to live the Christian faith, and teach that faith to your child?” said, “yes,” and took that promise seriously. Part of living into those promises has been regular, sustained involvement at Kenilworth Union, where mentoring adults have had a chance to know them by name. In that way, the mentoring adults were offered a chance to do the hard work of living into their own congregational baptismal promises, the same promises to which these youth had also just said, “yes” with confidence.

Experiencing the newly baptized infants alongside the growing faithful youth evoked a question: will these babies enjoy the same nurture, Christian guidance, and delight in God’s presence? Will their parents bring them to sacred places to encounter God in community? Will Kenilworth Union provide valuable spiritual nurture and mentoring if they do show up at church? Will God’s presence be made known?

This exploration of baptism within a congregation seeks to bridge the gap between the espoused values and the lived reality. In the baptismal liturgy, there are espoused values – explicit promises to guide and nurture. There is also an enacted lived reality. In most cases, only a small percentage of mentoring adults participate in the guiding and nurturing of those baptized.
Similarly, in the matrix of family time commitments, many do not prioritize church participation for their children. While the baptismal litany is a visionary, polyphonic “antiphonal” liturgy whereby God’s presence at the font is met with parental promises and accompanied by a congregational covenant, the value-reality gap evokes a whispered confessional mantra at every baptism, “O Little One, I wish I could say to you that we will keep the promises we have just spoken.”

The value-reality gap puts a finer point on the nature of baptism. Baptism says something about God and God’s people. It offers both an ethical mandate to guide and nurture Christian identity as well as a theological mandate to proclaim and dwell in the mystery of God’s presence. Within the ethical mandate, baptism insists on action: parents teaching faith to their child, congregation members guiding and nurturing, and each baptized person living out and renewing their faith year after year.

It is not difficult to fall short of those baptismal promises, domesticating baptism as a cultural rite unconnected to Christian witness. It is easy for a parent to idolize the image of a cherubic baby in his great-grandfather’s baptismal gown, turning a sacrament into a Hallmark holiday complete with Pinterest-perfect cupcakes. Yet, in the wide narrative of God’s gospel of grace, there remains an echo of a more hopeful affirmation that even if and when God’s people fail to “shepherd the baptized,” God is at work in them despite all human failing.

Within such a theological mandate, baptism as sacrament embodies a mingling of water and Holy Spirit, equally tangible and ineffable, rooted in the narrated promises of God’s love. Whether or not God’s people live into the promises made at the font, the narrative of scripture is ripe with the promise that while humans fall short of God’s glory, God’s love remains. God shows up in community, regardless of how fragmented or flailing it might be. In fact, it is
because of this enduring inability to live into the covenants to which an infinite incarnate God has called such mortal earthly creatures that the gospel of grace within the sacrament of baptism takes on such meaning.

Having spent the last year inviting the congregation to consider the relationship between baptismal promises and vital, participatory intergenerational relationships, adults and youth have equally recognized the gifts of God present in Christian community. Rooted in a theological conviction that baptism is communal by nature, it has not been difficult for the Kenilworth Union community to affirm that all Christians are called into covenant with God and one another to guide and nurture the baptized community.

What has been difficult, however, has been finding room in overcommitted schedules for such partnership. Octogenarians can guide third graders just as well as third graders can nurture the faith of octogenarians, but it requires participation. Showing up is at the center of a congregational baptismal identity, and there are fewer and fewer hours in a child’s week when he or she is available to join in such intergenerational Christian community. When trying to impact the value-reality gap, making time for God-in-community becomes the chief impediment of a baptismal identity, while active compassionate intergenerational participation becomes the ecclesial imperative.

**Story Three: The Chaos of Perfection – Research that Names the Gap**

Baptism is born within a human cultural context, and the fifteen hundred people baptized at Kenilworth Union between 1985-2005 experience life at the intersection of a particular set of challenges. At the heart of the Kenilworth Union context is the fact that young people in communities like New Trier Township feel such profound pressure to perform well in school for the sake of college admission and career preparation, that they spend sleepless nights on
homework and secure after-school tutors to turn a not-good-enough A- into an A.

Simultaneously, children at earlier and earlier ages are seeking positions on expensive elite sports teams in order to secure prestigious collegiate athletic scholarships, which precipitates participation in exclusive weekend-long travel team commitments and private one-on-one coaching. Sports and school begin to preclude Sunday worship participation. Even participation in church community comes with resume-building potential. Christian charity and mission can become an opportunity to get to the top.\textsuperscript{40} Kenilworth Union youth ministries seemingly designs mission trips accordingly, aware that a mission trip to Jamaica is more attractive to college admission directors, and therefore to students and parents, than one to Detroit.

Ironically, while parents lament, “there has to be a better way,” there is evidence that some of these wearisome tactics do lead to securing that longed-for admissions letter from an Ivy League school, but at what cost?\textsuperscript{41} When even children as young as fourth grade seek psychological support for anxiety disorders brought on by such academic pressure and over-programming, it is no wonder the church has it’s plate full when seeking to combat the interrelated web of depression, substance abuse, self-worth, and resilience.

A growing collection of literature clarifies and confirms the Kenilworth Union social context, naming some of the issues behind the baptism value-reality gap. One researcher suggests that a generation of helicopter parents, seeking to safeguard their children at all cost, have left many now-young-adults over attached and fearfully experiencing their first taste of failure.\textsuperscript{42} Another urges a pivot toward a more meaningful life, after seeing an unthinking commitment to elite education at iconic institutions leave a generation of well-educated young adults adrift and in search of significance.\textsuperscript{43} One more examines the intersection of the pressure
of perfection and material wealth that created what she calls a *generation in distress*, who are claiming to be “missing something inside.” The message is clear: change must come.

While these researchers heap undue blame on parents, they speak the truth about a system-wide educational institution that incentivizes a particular type of success. The path toward *success* involves a speedy race toward an invisible finish line, while *a meaningful life* might involve slowing down for the sake of reflection and meaning-making. The paths toward success pack every hour of the day with success-driven activities, making the slower process of reflection and meaning-making at church or elsewhere look like a waste of time. If unexamined, the *generations in distress* will continue down a path where suicidal ideation and social-emotional distress thrive. Moreover, even if a strong baptismal identity can be a *balm in Gilead*, families struggle to *show up* in sacred places amid the cultural pressures to perpetuate overcommitted youth schedules. While the above assessment of the over-programmed cultural context rings true at Kenilworth Union, what seems even more interesting is that the conclusions – seeking meaning or significance in the midst of distress or failure – seem theological in nature. Will the church be a place of meaning-making in the midst of such chaos? Will the church adapt to address the current challenges of childhood, adolescence and early adulthood as emerging generations confront new forms of the world’s *tohu va vohu*?

Critical congregational adaptation is multidimensional, and includes parents and mentors, as well as youth. In conversations with parents of the unique cohort of active youth described at a baptism, they have almost always intentionally said “no” to conflicts that take place on Sunday mornings or Wednesday nights, prioritizing worship, youth group or choir – a countercultural choice. Many study scripture at home with their families. Some mothers gather weekly for Bible
study together. Some fathers are active on committees and teaching Sunday school. In this case, it is easy to see how the apple does not fall far from the tree. Parental participation matters.

However, those same parents have articulated the progressive difficulty of keeping Sunday mornings free of school or sport commitments as their children grow. Simultaneously, the pressure is creeping up on their young people: homework becomes more demanding, and even prayer requests at youth group on Wednesday nights include exams they claim will impact their high school program of study, and as they have been made keenly aware, ultimately their college and career path. Terrific pressure is mounting in their lives, and it is not clear how long voluntary church participation can be sustained before the seismic force of academic demands pushes it out of their already packed schedules.

Consequently, even before high school, youth are experiencing what universities have dubbed duck syndrome: the pressure to appear “effortlessly perfect,” smart, accomplished, fit, beautiful and popular, all without visible struggle. The demanding culture calls each person to be like a duck, gliding calmly across the waters of life while hiding beneath the surface just how frantically and relentlessly they are paddling. This duck life is hard for anyone of any age, and duck syndrome is unquestionably pervasive across all generations of the North Shore culture, but it is most problematic for young teenagers who are in the process of being taught that wearing a mask or hiding their struggles is the only way. Substance abuse, depression, eating disorders, and risky sexual behaviors are often symptoms of seeking such perfection.

In conversation with youth about such anxieties, they have described an inevitable catch-twenty-two. On the one hand, they live in an anxious state of fear-of-achieving, which drives the packed schedules of tutors and coaches. On the other hand, never given the option to fail, even
on a small scale, they teeter on the edge of fear-of-failure, wondering who they will be – and how they will survive – if and when they do experience some inkling of inadequacy.\textsuperscript{46}

This can be exacerbated at Kenilworth Union, which rests, in part, in the theological heritage of the New England puritans, who interpreted Christianity as “a means to the self-discipline that enabled their economic success,” and who harnessed “wealth and industry to piety.”\textsuperscript{47} These young people can be indoctrinated in a problematic bootstrap-pulling meritocracy. The more cynical Bart Simpson, when asked to pray at the family dinner table exhibits the dark side of such meritocracy, praying, “Dear God, we paid for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing.”\textsuperscript{48} Might even a return to simple spiritual practices like gratitude, confession or Sabbath offer a way to bridge the gap?\textsuperscript{49}

At this stage, the church would be wise to resist the urge to “program” their way out of the value-reality gap. The same vicious cycle that catches teenagers, catches churches as well. By all means, the adults most fervently living into a recognized and recognizable baptismal identity know deeply that life is more precious than perfection and superficial human imperfections in affluent communities are miniscule compared to the deepest sorrows of the world; working hard to communicate this message of grace in an ungraceful world is critical to Christian vocation. However, in some ways, churches like Kenilworth Union work in a context that reinforces the culture of \textit{duck syndrome}, guided by an unspoken philosophy that urges, “if only we were smart, accomplished, and good enough, then we could singlehandedly rid the world of all suffering, despair, violence and evil.” While this philosophy might be rooted in an ethical obligation toward one another and society, it can have dignity-destroying unintentional consequences, risking paternalism instead of compassion, arrogance instead of justice.\textsuperscript{50}
In Christian community, there is yet another way – neither hiding struggles below the surface like a duck or hiding in shame because of imperfections, nor doubling down on seeking society’s idea of success and paddling hard, believing that brilliant ideas or hard work alone can solve the problems of the world. Instead, Christians are called to share their vulnerabilities with God and one another, confessing even the deepest mistakes to the One-who-forgives, allowing imperfections and chaos to be part of life’s journey. Baptized in Christ, the world becomes wildly turned upside down, even death loses its sting, and within the narrative of this humble manger-born God-with-us, faithful people “glimpse a puzzling, raging, weeping, shouting, pleading, disruptive, disturbing, and even evolving God, moving within the deep and appearing in unexpected and unplanned places.” Baptism speaks life against the chaos of duck syndrome.

“Imitate the fish,” suggests Ambrose of Milan, as an alternative to the perfection-seeking duck. Preaching to the newly baptized, Ambrose says that a fish “swimming with the swell of the water is not swallowed up because the fish is used to swimming.” He says, “to you, this world is the sea; currents uncertain, waves deep, storms fierce.” Instead of swimming in fear like a frantic duck to “fake it ‘till you make it” as the saying goes, Ambrose offers this: none will be swallowed up by the “waves of the world” who are used to the swell of the water, the chaos of everyday life. Bonnie Miller-McLemore reiterates this saying; “God bestows peace, not as a promise of perfect serenity or an end to chaos, anxiety or strife, but as a source of strength in turmoil.” Catherine Keller adds, “if we unclench the needy, greedy ego and let it ‘let be,’ the divine process will not do our swimming for us, but may guide us within a depth that even now bears and births us.” Spiritual practices in Christian community give less authority to the duck life, and more to the fish, where one can ‘let be’ with God and one another in the depth of chaos.
Acknowledging the chaos instead of defeating it, the community might authentically meet one another in the struggles, and seek human dignity at all cost.

The anxiety producing cultural trends that put off or hide the reality of chaos are beyond the scope of any child’s power alone. For that reason, adults and children should come together to say “no” to the tohu va vohu of such societal pressures, and say “yes” to participation in resilient intergenerational spiritual community as a way of meeting the divine. It takes a nuanced and pervasive invitation to cajole congregation members toward a recognized and recognizable baptismal identity rooted in such a should statement – namely, an invitation that understands baptismal identity to be most fully lived out in the hardest places, where the gospel proclamation meets compassionate participation: in the deep sorrow and struggle of life.

Ecclesiology: Love that Bears with Chaos in Divine and Dusty Community

Given the reality of tohu va vohu that extends beyond the often polished and privileged chaos of Kenilworth Union and echoes out toward the innumerable sufferings of the world, a baptismal identity finds the place where God’s spirit intercedes with “sighs too deep for words,” where “deep calls to deep.” Again, the first chapter of Genesis connects the baptismal promises to an active baptismal identity that dwells within the deep. This is what Keller describes as a tehomic theology and ethic, from tehom, the Hebrew word for the Genesis 1:2 watery abyss. Guided by the ancient scriptures which imagine a “messier beginning, a heteroglossial deep,” an active baptismal ethic is that which says, to “love is to bear with the chaos.”

Bearing with the chaos does not mean loving the chaos or attempting to outright escape it. It means standing with vulnerable confidence in the midst of such chaos. A baptismal identity, then, is not just for the sake of “being a good Christian” but for the sake of being able to endure, to face the chaos in community, to live the examined life of love that is struggle, bearing with the
chaos. Baptismal identity gathers at the intersection of joy and sorrow, welcoming Jürgen Moltmann’s theodicy that says, “God and suffering belong together, just as in this life the cry for God and the suffering experienced in pain belong together.”

Some might argue that the church is not a great place to develop baptismal identities. Churches, like people, fall short of the glory of God, and so the church is often simply an “organized denial” of the gospel promises. Churches can reinforce social norms and behaviors expected within the culture-at-large, deftly setting up exclusionary barriers, becoming a cause of suffering instead of strength in the midst of it. Yet, if gathering-together in sacred places is to mean anything, then there becomes a profound ecclesial trust in God to show up “wherever two or three are gathered” and bind the community together “with cords that cannot be broken.”

In light of the common failures of church life, a tehomic baptismal identity that sees love as the act of bearing with the tohu va vohu demands a “divine and dusty” ecclesiology. As David Bosch explains it, “the church realizes at once that it is disreputable and shabby, susceptible to all human frailties; yet also the church is itself a mystery.” In baptism, there is a rehearsal and proclamation of the gospel’s divine and dusty message, lingering in the meeting place of water and Spirit, where God’s incarnation embodies “a quality inseparable from life in all its frailty and ambiguities.” At church, the work of God is visible, even in human brokenness. Even the church’s most failed attempt at gathering for worship or Christian community has embedded within it the dusty mystery of God’s redemptive power.

**Story Four: Youth Group as Co-Suffering**

If church itself is a divine and dusty mystery, then any gathering becomes a place for the church community to dwell together in the mystery of God. This divine and dusty mystery is matched by the mystery of God present at the font, both in the moment of baptism and in the
lifelong living out of those baptismal promises. Within these ecclesial and sacramental mysteries, gathering together at church or beyond the church’s walls for the sake of compassionate participation becomes a clear way in which Kenilworth Union members live out their baptismal promises. Action and reflection create a feedback loop; compassionate participation builds a narrated and proclaimed baptismal identity, and reciprocally narrating a baptismal identity reinforces compassionate participation.

The word compassion comes from the Latin roots *com* (with) and *pati* (suffer) meaning to “suffer with” or to “suffer together.” Stories of compassion or co-suffering within the Kenilworth Union community abound. While, in light of the cultural context, the congregation does not always exhibit the hoped-for old-school markers of excellent congregational participation, like abundant, persistent Sunday school participation or constant, uninterrupted Sunday worship attendance, the congregation does participate in co-suffering: a persistent, demanding participation that embodies the baptismal water promises at an unspeakable depth.

In agitating the youth groups about baptism, it became clear that youth learned co-suffering at Wednesday night youth group. Beginning in fifth grade, youth gather for youth group where, after goofy activities that often include whipped cream or running through the sanctuary, but thankfully not both at the same time, they gather for prayer to honestly consider the rough edges and brokenness in their own lives and in the world around them. Youth group offers each young person a chance to dig deeper into the challenges before them, confronting the paradox of the divine and dusty world through trust-games, friendship, service and prayer.

The youth took part in a number of games created explicitly to explore baptismal identity. The most loved game was called Noah’s Ark, where youth were animals “two-by-two” and the adults were the “watery chaos” of the flood. The goal of this game was for the youth to defeat the
chaos by finding the “olive branch.” Admittedly, it was essentially a combination of freeze tag and hide-and-seek, but it offered a powerful launching point for post-game conversation.

After playing Noah’s Ark, the youth were asked, “what is the chaos in your life?” Just the day before, the local school had an emergency lock-down, which was the topic most narrated as chaos; a man had taken his own life using a handgun in the park adjacent to the school, and because of the gun, while the police were assessing the situation to find out if the school was in danger, the teachers were required to begin all emergency lock-down procedures. Students were scared, sad and emotionally exhausted by the chaos of that situation. They also named the chaos of Walter Scott’s death the week earlier by police in North Charleston, South Carolina; the chaos of a tornado that had left victims in Illinois homeless; the chaos of Boko Haram who abducted more than two hundred Nigerian girls months earlier; the chaos of homelessness and hunger; and the chaos of fear. This post-game reflection allowed the participants to acknowledge the chaos in their lives and the world-at-large. In an individualistic culture of isolation, they had an opportunity to see the world through the lens of compassion. They began to see themselves as co-sufferers in the struggles of the world. They could share with each other, build empathy concerning the world beyond them, seeking the mystery of God’s presence in a shared prayer.

The conversation itself is further evidence of co-suffering, not just the conversation’s content. After playing a game together, anxious, squirrely ten and eleven year-olds were able to sit compassionately and acknowledge the chaos of the world because of the trust evoked by game play. According to the science of play, when a group plays a game together, they foster a sense of trust because in a game, everyone starts out on equal footing. Everyone follows the same rules and pursues the same goal. As temporary or limited as a game might be, it offers individuals a safe launching point to “explore social interactions” with people who one might
“ordinarily be anxious around or avoid all together.” As can be seen by the candor of the conversation, “play sets the stage for cooperative socialization: trust, empathy, caring and sharing.” After the game, which built trust and conjured up the image of chaos, the youth could participate compassionately by listening to each other and sharing their personal and communal experience of chaos locally and globally.

While socially, Noah’s Ark might be a commonly known story, theologically, the chaos of the flood holds a particularly poignant power. The chaos of the flood can be read as a cosmic event, rooted again in the Genesis one pre-creation chaos. “The orders established at the origin of the cosmos disintegrate in this catastrophe,” and the *tehomic* abyss unleashes waters across the face of the earth. In this way, the flood story offers the ark as shelter from the storm. Perhaps this is why even the least religious of new parents are apt to plaster Noah’s ark as an image on the wall of an infant’s nursery. Noah floats faithfully above the watery chaos surrounded by pairs of animals who reveal God’s promises of safe harbor. Even so, a mission trip to Galveston, Texas after Hurricane Ike once allowed young people to work amid the rubble of a police station evidence locker, showing the truth of Noah’s Ark firsthand: water can be at once a vital gift and a destructive power, ruining not just lives and possessions, but also a sense of safety and justice.

Ancient Christians were compelled by the flood story as a metaphor for baptism because it offers these dual realities of danger and safety, life and death. In light of the chaos and destruction that the floodwaters signify, Cyril of Jerusalem held that during baptism, “in the same moment you were dying and being born, that saving water was at once your grave and your mother.” Ancient churches adopted the shape of an ark, and ancient fonts the shape of a tomb, pointing to the dying and rising with Christ that is “prefigured by the flood.” An ancient
Byzantine liturgy illustrates how Noah’s post-chaos survival foreshadows the “mystery of grace” that comes in Christ’s dying and rising, the mystery made flesh.67

Noah’s ark is an easily recognizable starting place to talk about baptismal identity, the mystery of God’s presence over the water, and the persistence of chaos that is cyclically unleashed onto mortal life.68 The cycle of chaos and order continues. Noah’s ark is a reminder that – like ordinary human lives in which one is no more sinner than saint – water is no more life-giving than destructive, no more peaceful than chaotic. Peace does not come immediately, but in the slow return of a dove with an olive branch. Integrating the flood story into games and conversation helped youth explore their common baptismal identity and the baptismal promises, bearing with the chaos, and becoming co-suffering participants in sacred community.

**Story Five: Knitting as Co-Suffering**

Youth are not the only ones who learn co-suffering in community. A group of women gather at church to knit twice a month creating gorgeous shawls and blankets for clergy to distribute to congregation members in the hospital, and for local hospital or hospice chaplains to give to patients seeking an extra measure of comfort in the midst of illness. As an author of the rich history of knitting can attest, “in chaos or in silence, knitting opens up space for us to soften and find the brilliant spaces inside the dark.”69 Knitters offer tangible comfort and intangible solace for those facing the chaos of suffering.

It was puzzling then, when the knitters declined a new project. A pastor suggested that they might find it meaningful to knit bereavement blankets for the neonatal intensive care unit to give to parents of a son or daughter who is stillborn or dies shortly after birth at the hospital. The knitters said the project sounded much too somber. They declined, that is, until Violet – a woman in her eighties who has since joined the saints of light – spoke up.70 She tenderly shared that she
had three miscarriages when she was younger. One, a daughter, grew practically full-term, and Violet said, “If there was a tiny knit blanket that I could have tucked in a drawer, so that on days when I was thinking of my baby daughter who died, I could have just placed my hand on that blanket, remembering her, I think it might have made a difference to me.” With Violet’s comment, other women began to open up about their own painful experiences of miscarriage – either in their own lives or in the lives of sisters or friends or now-grown daughters. Even within – or likely, because it is – a topic that can be so emotionally isolating and hushed because of its seemingly impolite sorrow, it was only after that bold vulnerable conversation that knitting bereavement blankets suddenly became a priority. The blankets are a homemade touch in a sterile hospital, making sacred the place of sorrow.

Fast forward a few months, when Mary Grace, a hospital chaplain, offered a baptismal testimony that echoed Violet’s experience. On Ash Wednesday, a patient and her husband had come in for labor, but the doctors found that the baby had no heart tones, their child had died in utero. They called for Mary Grace to offer the imposition of ashes in the midst of their grief. After a devastatingly long labor, Mary Grace was called back to see the couple who asked for their child to be baptized. Wrapping the smallest of infants in a bereavement blanket, and cupping water in her hand, the chaplain offered those same water promises, “in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” This time, unlike the visceral joy of encountering a wiggling baby at a baptism in community, it was a private poignant place of grief, encountering God’s spirit hovering over the water on the stark threshold between life and death. Not speaking English, the couple had requested ashes and baptism through an interpreter, but Mary Grace noticed that the rituals of Ash Wednesday and baptism spoke for themselves, articulating a deeper sacred
language of faith. First ashes, then water; the two sacred rituals intermingled, one about mortality imparted to the living, and one about new life, imparted onto the dead.

It is for such a stranger as this, a grieving mother at a local hospital, that the knitters create bereavement blankets. At the corner of joy and sorrow – where the joy of bearing a child is met with the sorrow of death, and where the simple joy of gathering to knit is met with the sorrow of miscarriages years past – there, God’s baptismal promises are enacted and made manifest. The knitters live into the baptismal promises made to the parents whose child had died, a promise to guide and nurture them in continued faithfulness, even and especially when “deep cries out to deep.” Knitting makes this group of women co-sufferers with this family whom they will not meet, and simultaneously prepares the knitters to be co-sufferers with every family within the congregation that loses a child, families whom the knitters can and will meet.

Is the knitter’s work not also an acting-out of baptismal promises made to that small sojourning infant whose life was at once shared and unshared with the world? Christian traditions struggle to name this liminal place between life and death, just born and yet not alive. One chaplain writes with compassion that here, “the line of demarcation between life and death is not a rigid one,” and the baptism of a stillborn child at the time of labor and delivery acknowledges that the mother’s child “is a real person, has lived for however short a time, and will always have its recognized place within the human family and the wider family of God.”72 Another chaplain boldly claims that “the streams of grief” evoke baptismal imagery, and “salty tears of grief” in fact guide parents of stillborn children to the font.73 One Presbyterian author, seeking some way to articulate God’s presence and the child’s personhood at the time of miscarriage or stillbirth seeks out wisdom not from her own tradition, which says terribly little, but from the Greek Orthodox writings of John Zizioulas. He claims that, just as baptism is
mysterious, “personhood is mysterious” In that deep mystery of personhood, we are met by “God’s love as the ground of all being.” The mystery of personhood does not require “a certain developmental capacity or even a certain stage of cellular development.” In such love – a love that bears with the chaos – the mystery of God unveils the “ability to give a unique identity, a unique name to the beloved.” In every baptism, that personhood-in-God is what Christians reiterate and remember at the font, saying, “you, beloved, are named and claimed by God,” At such a liminal place between life and death, God’s baptismal promises are made known in full.

**Infant Baptism: Promises Made on Your Behalf**

The narrative thread about infant baptism at the holy boundary between life and death offers a launching point to explore the long and harried history of infant baptism itself. Some traditions embrace infant baptism completely, and others reject it wholeheartedly. Because Kenilworth Union is a nondenominational protestant church claiming no specific creed, the church offers no written mandate about who should or should not be baptized, nor legislates the meaning of baptism when it does occur. The gift of this nondenominational context is that there is room to stand within the multiple streams of baptismal identity expressed within the Christian tradition, without straining to claim only one way of practicing baptism. Consequently, Kenilworth Union has long affirmed the shared hope for “unity and common witness” expressed by the global partners of the World Council of Churches, and within that ecumenical movement, affirms “in things essential, unity; in things doubtful, liberty; in all things charity.” Within this wide theological lens, clarity around a theology of baptism at Kenilworth Union comes from the liturgy and practice of infant baptism which has occurred since the church’s beginning. Given this implied reverence for infant baptism, it is important to note that the theological landscape within Protestantism around the practice of infant baptism is quite broad.
To link theology and practice, consider the small handful of parents at Kenilworth Union who do not bring their children forward for baptism because they come from one of the protestant traditions in which baptism is reserved as a practice for believers after conversion or confession of faith. Among the theological reasons why this tradition of believer baptism persists, Karl Barth claims that the personal faith of the one being baptized is of greatest import. For Barth, baptism is a human response to God’s grace.\textsuperscript{80} John Howard Yoder, an Anabaptist theologian, adds that, “to baptize an infant is to reject God’s peaceful, non-coercive nature.”\textsuperscript{81} Thus, God always gives humans the “freedom of unbelief.”\textsuperscript{82} Likewise, Letty Russell says that adult baptism accompanied by conversion emphasizes the self-chosen, explicit commitment to “lifelong struggle in covenant relationship with God and neighbor.”\textsuperscript{83} Alternatively, John Douglas Hall claims that baptism has been domesticated and co-opted by Christendom to such an extent that it has little or no ties to the lived faith.\textsuperscript{84} In order to renew the baptismal practices of the church, Hall joins voices with Moltmann who puts forth the possibility that adult baptism, accompanied by a call to confession might result in more authentic Christian practice and by extension co-suffering participation.\textsuperscript{85} The ecumenical document \textit{Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry} sees Moltmann’s point and warns churches to guard against “the practice of apparently indiscriminate baptism,” valuing “the responsibility or the nurture of baptized children to mature commitment to Christ.”\textsuperscript{86}

The baptism data at Kenilworth Union would indicate, however, that most parents bring infants or young children forward for baptism. The theologians who write in favor of infant baptism, like many sixteenth century reformers, do so out of a theological understanding of what happens in baptism. For Luther, baptism is primarily about God’s action. Baptism is the way in which God has chosen to live out God’s covenant with humanity. Because the primary actor in
baptism, for Luther, is God, it does not matter how strong or weak one’s faith is at the time of baptism, nor how young or old one is when baptized.\textsuperscript{87}

For Calvin, in infant baptism God keeps God’s own “timetable of regeneration” and faith can come later, on God’s time, so to speak, even if baptism happens prior to faith.\textsuperscript{88} Calvin even goes so far as to claim that before a child is born, God has already declared that the child belongs to God, adopted into God’s family.\textsuperscript{89} It is as if Calvin is reading through the lens of the psalms poetic affirmation, “you knit me together in my mother’s womb.”\textsuperscript{90} This ancient Psalm whispers God’s baptismal promises to each person, before, during and after baptism. Going one step further, if the claim of Luther is that God’s actions matter most at the font, then such theological declaration offers baptismal promises to those who may never be able to understand faith through reason, particularly those who live with developmental disorders and intellectual disabilities. When children with Fragile X Syndrome, Downs Syndrome or Fetal Alcohol Syndrome are baptized as infants, the mystery of God’s grace is as palpable and ineffable with them as it is with any other child. The sacrament is for them as it is for anyone else, as Augustine claims, a “visible sign of an invisible grace.”\textsuperscript{91} Later, when youth with such intellectual disabilities are confirmed, they do so each in their own way: a way that is more participatory than creedal, more embodied than \textit{rightly} professed. As Aquinas insists, neither intellectual disabilities, nor anything else in all creation, can “keep a human creature from responding to God’s grace.”\textsuperscript{92}

The mystery of God’s grace is always at work in the sacrament of baptism. When hoping for a congregational baptismal identity that exhibits compassionate participation in the form of love which bears with the chaos, it is most compelling – theologically and pastorally – to seek those places in the long arch of theological history that offer a wide reading of God’s love.
Perhaps only by mirroring God’s love can human love even begin to bear with the chaos of deep *tehomic* suffering.

**Story Six: The Failure of Belonging**

The theological or *doctrinal* efficacy of baptism is not in question. The narrative of scripture and the history of Christian thought and Christian experience testify that God is a God of covenant promise. However, the ethical, ecclesial or *operational* efficacy of baptism remains a human mess. Baptism is not always *operationally* effective, i.e. there is not always unmistakable evidence that the baptismal promises are lived out within a communal baptismal identity that is recognized and recognizable. Sometimes, the community fails to do what they promised: teach the Christian faith to their children and guide and nurture faithful disciples.

Sometimes even the church’s organizational structure gets in the way of living out baptismal promises. For example, in baptism, a family’s faith overlaps. Grandparents often beam up from the pews, and aunts or uncles often stand up as godparents. Family and congregational intergenerational lives are knit together at the font. However, as soon as the child is baptized, the child is moved from the sanctuary to the nursery, from a place of intergenerational diversity to a place of infant-only monoculture, save for a few teaching adults. At Kenilworth Union, from baptism until confirmation, children are in Children’s Chapel and Sunday school, and are almost exclusively torn from the intergenerational mentoring world of the sanctuary.

There are arguments to be made for this kind of segregation. From a logistical standpoint, it is doubtful that all the children could physically fit in the sanctuary with their parents, although changes to worship times could alleviate that barrier. From a developmental perspective, social scientist James Fowler argues that children pass through a number of stages until they reach adult faith. Parts of the church liturgy may be developmentally beyond a child’s ability to
understand, and parts of the church liturgy added to enhance an adult’s faith may be too mature for a child. Based on Fowler’s research, an argument could be made that adult faith formation rooted in paradox and transcendence is legitimately interrupted by a noisy child’s presence. However, if Kenilworth Union in particular and the church-at-large in general are to build resilient faith within a baptismal identity, congregational practices need to explicitly foster intergenerational relationship. Baptismal identity is formed when families and communities share life and faith stories with one another, not hollow saccharine stories, but the stories of suffering and overcoming such sorrow. Storytelling allows struggles to be named and identities to be birthed.

Having conducted psychological research on storytelling in intergenerational contexts, the Family Narratives Lab at Emory University confirms the value of community storytelling. This research shows that well-being, resilience and an ability to face adversity are not innate, but come from such storytelling, because it allows for the development of an “intergenerational self,” in which a child understands him or herself as part of something bigger than just his or her own experience. Part of how an individual begins to define self is not just through personal experience, but “by the experiences of parents and their parents before them.” In fact, constructing one’s own autobiographical memory within the context of family intergenerational narratives allows individuals to “cope with aversive experiences, resolve negative affect, and draw on past emotions in the service of understanding the present and future.” In this way, the promises made at the font matter because in living out those promises, a child can be strengthened to face adversity and develop resilient identity. Put in this light, storytelling in intergenerational Christian community develops a deeper baptismal ethic.
Storytelling is critical for both parents and the intergenerational mentoring community. Within a Christian context, Fuller Youth Institute contends that non-parent intergenerational mentoring relationships are key, and simultaneously the National Studies of Youth and Religion claims parents are the key to lasting faith. At the baptismal font, these two claims merge. Parents and a diverse non-parent intergenerational mentoring community come together and make promises to walk alongside a newly baptized person, sharing stories and standing with vulnerable courage alongside that person, bearing with them in the chaos.

Parents matter when it comes to shaping the religious lives of children and youth. Because it is parents and churches who are concerned with the faith of young people, Kenda Creasy Dean claims that “lackadaisical faith [in American teenagers] is not young people’s issue, but the twenty-first-century church’s issue” and that young people need to see their parents walk and talk faith in order to participate in a God-oriented life. Dean would critique Kenilworth Union, saying that it is too institution-reliant in child faith formation. Parents have an abiding influence on their children’s faith formation, especially faith formation in the home. Drawing on reformation history, “Martin Luther was convinced that Christian formation began with youth ministry and youth ministry started at home.” Youth faithfulness begins at home with a parent’s commitment to nurturing faith.

In the perpetual search for committed Sunday school teachers, the desire for parental commitment becomes indispensable in the life of the church. Periodically, however, and with a fair amount of vulnerability, some parents articulate a lack of knowledge of the biblical stories being taught, or a discomfort leading prayers with children in the classroom. Fostering faithful practices and biblical knowledge for parents becomes a critical way, not only to develop the baptismal identity of parents, but to develop the baptismal identity of their children through an at
home faith. As a result, Kenilworth Union is in the beginning stages of redeveloping parent Bible studies, not for the sake of knowledge so to speak, but to offer a place for parents to share in the tohu va vohu with others in the presence of the Christian sacred story.

Congregational participation at the font is what leads to sticky faith – a faith that endures or sticks. Sticky faith is at once personal and communal, internal and external, mature and maturing. In particular, Kara Powell claims that when young people have five non-parent adults at church who know their name and ask after them, they are more likely to develop sticky faith. The promises made by the congregation at baptism are a beginning of enacting those relationships that lead to sticky faith. Powell would critique the highly age-segregated structure of Kenilworth Union saying, “it is impossible for us to ‘make God’s faithfulness known throughout all generations’ if our congregations are permanently divided into age-segregated classes, communities and worship experiences” In its current form, while the explicit curriculum teaches worship practices in children’s chapel and the implicit curriculum teaches children sacred songs, prayers and stories, the null curriculum teaches children that their worship is ‘lesser’ or even that they do not ‘belong’ in the ‘true’ adult worship space. Developing a deeper baptismal identity means advocating for intergenerational worship experiences as well as multiple forums where children, youth and adults can share stories with one another.

This question of intergenerational storytelling becomes poignant each year when one or two confirmation students decide not to be confirmed. At this time, students often articulate that they do not feel like they belong at church. What practices of parental or intergenerational story-sharing could help them understand themselves as part of the community? Diana Butler Bass reinforces the importance of hearing their claim, “belonging is part of identity… to belong is to be,” and therefore a sense of belonging at church is critical for inhabiting a baptismal identity.
If these young confirmation students had more time to build intergenerational mentoring relationships, or had been given unmistakable evidence of faith from parents, would they have felt there was more room for them in sacred community? This failure of belonging rearticulates and affirms the need for vital storied relationships, particularly parent and mentor relationships, which are met by the good news of the Christian faith story.

**Story Seven: Children Retelling God’s Story**

What makes Christian intergenerational relationships different from secular ones? Partaking in these relationships “in a way that disclose the gospel is what makes them the Christian thing to do.” Baptism, then, is operationally effective when the baptized person dwells within the divine and dusty sacred community in order to experience the mystery of God expressed in the gospel. Experiencing the baptism of another person can be powerful; it is a chance to recall and remember the promises made by God and community, a reaffirmation of one’s own baptismal vows. Eucharist, too, is a sacramental ritual that recalls the grand narrative of God’s grace, and even the words etched into myriad communion tables offer a visual reminder: Jesus says, “do this in remembrance of me.” Remembering builds baptismal identity. These liturgical rituals generate knowledge in a way that is “corporeal rather than cerebral, active rather than contemplative, transformative rather than speculative.” Post-baptismal rituals – confirmation, the liturgy of reaffirmation of baptism, or even experiencing the baptism of another person – each draw a person back into the mystery of God’s presence made known in telling and remembering the gospel story.

The history of Christian baptismal practices helps emphasize the importance of post-baptismal rituals. For early Christians in the pre-Constantine era, renouncing wealth, power or lust, visiting the sick or imprisoned, and attending worship regularly were radical, even
dangerous behaviors that marked belonging in the Christian community. In that era, a five-year process of pre-baptismal rituals taught the gospel story to adults seeking such belonging and post-baptismal rituals reinforced a well-known story. Alternatively, in Christendom from Constantine to Colonialism, these more tangible ethics of Christian behavior became less expected. Everyone was baptized, including the whole Roman Army, as Theodosian’s Code attests, becoming ‘defacto’ ‘more or less’ Christians. Many were, in fact, more or less forced into claiming a Christian identity. Pre-baptismal and post-baptism rituals shifted and became initiation rituals for priests, monks or nuns. Those who wanted to live like Christ became ‘super-Christians’ living apart from the general populous, while for the ‘defacto’ Christian, baptism was a mark of “civil obedience” instead of its opposite. Now, in an emerging post-Christendom era, Christianity is becoming less normative and more countercultural. Yet, infant baptism remains a reality, an accepted cultural practice. In this era of cultural transition, the post-baptismal landscape can ritualize life-changing events so that a baptized person might move from being a ‘secular’ Christian, toward a “further up and further in” faith with a deeper “growing up in God.”

In seeking to nurture this deeper “growing up in God” at Kenilworth Union, confirmation is the post-baptismal ritual that has the most cultural clout. Parents often expect their children to participate in confirmation, even if they have not been to church in years. Confirmation, historically, is a rite of passage explicitly connected to the sacrament of baptism, in which a young person is invited to “choose to become who you already are,” a baptized person belonging to God. In 2015, confirmation was made more explicitly connected to baptism. Whether they had prepared for Confirmation Sunday in the silent, embodied, week long experience of the wilderness confirmation program, or in the noisy, Sunday morning experience of the classroom
program, each confirmand ended their confirmation year at the baptismal font for a blessing in the ritual of “remembering your baptism” before receiving a confirmation blessing. The water was abundant. Among the youth who were drenched at the font, some giggled from the water streaming down their head, while others came through with tears and a quiet peace, a connection to the ritual of baptism at the “liminal, generative” unnamable place between God at the water’s edge and God in community.

Ritual is a pathway toward knowledge, but knowledge is only deepened with perpetual compassionate participation in the gospel story. If baptismal promises are rooted in the kerygmatic narrative of scripture – the story of God’s love proclaimed – then biblical literacy is integral to baptismal identity and should be central to developing post-baptismal rituals. Without knowledge of the gospel story, seeking the heteroglossial narratives at the intersection of one’s own story, the community’s story, and the gospel story is futile. Biblical storytelling is critical to enacting baptismal promises within an ostensibly biblically illiterate culture.

Biblical illiteracy is pervasive. While fourteen year olds study cellular biology or do algebra on a daily basis, in confirmation, they confuse or conflate Abraham or Moses, or misremember the basic stories of Christmas or Easter. In the context of infrequent or irregular church participation, biblical illiteracy is no surprise. The U.S. public does not fare much better; according to a Pew Research Center poll, more than a quarter of Americans did not know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and half did not know the names of the four gospels. Biblical illiteracy diminishes and disrupts post-baptismal rituals, like confirmation, requiring an ever-deepening pre-ritual preparation that explores the basic story of faith. Only with such knowledge can emerging young adults integrate the faith stories with their understanding of the world as they come of age. Admittedly, biblical literacy can begin sooner than age fourteen. Grounded in
the importance of the gospel story for a deeper post-baptismal “growing up in God,” this year, Kenilworth Union sought out new ways to teach the basic story of Christian faith to children. The Children’s Ministry staff and committee intentionally sought out new to tell the gospel story to children. In the process, storytelling was connected to baptismal promises. Choosing the Godly Play storytelling curriculum offered the clearest narrative of God’s story, and children have been gently welcomed to wonder about the mystery of God’s presence in each story through a multi-sensory approach. After implementing this new storytelling method, parents have since shared stories – and in one case, even a video – of their children retelling the biblical stories at home to them or to their dolls. Biblical storytelling builds theological imagination. In the upside-down way that is the mystery of God, children are sharing the gospel story with their parents, instead of vice versa. Storytelling begets storytelling.

Because of some long held traditions within the church, the children subsequently have two opportunities to be the storytellers in the sanctuary: at the Christmas pageant and on Children’s Day. The ritual of storytelling on the chancel steps becomes another post-baptismal ritual and thus a part of their growing up in God. This renewed emphasis on gospel storytelling with children allows the gospel promises to permeate people’s lives, not only of children but of youth and adults, so that they can endure, face the chaos, and live the examined life of love that is struggle, bearing with one another.

Story Eight: Funeral Promises and Baptismal Hope

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote that what she missed most about parish ministry was “standing by stone bowls full of water and open graves full of dirt.” Her observation traces a thin line from the mystery of God in the baptismal “dying and rising in Christ” to the mystery of God “in life, in death, in life beyond death.” The funeral is a “continuation
and elaboration of the baptismal service,” and one church even punctuates this baptism-funeral connection, calling their Riverside baptism spot “the old burying ground.”

The baptism-funeral connection was brought full circle when David, the husband of Presbyterian leader Carol McDonald, died from injuries sustained in a winter car crash. In the moment her husband died, Carol heard a bell chime in the hospital, the bell that signals a new baby has been born; his “life of faith birthed a life of new hope” she wrote later, quoting a Celtic benediction, “as it was in the hidden vitality of the womb, so may it be at my birth into eternity.” At Carol’s urging, near the end of David’s funeral, the congregation participated in the post-baptismal ritual called “Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant.” The one presiding began the ritual, “We thank you for the life and witness of David McDonald whose baptism is now complete in death.” Later, Carol wrote that while it is often difficult to comprehend the “dying and rising” language of baptism while holding an infant in arms, the “completion of baptism at death is a powerful reminder that life is circular and always in Christ.”

When Kenilworth Union experienced an almost fifty percent increase in funerals in 2015, the circular image of life, death and new life became poignant. In her All Saint’s Day sermon, Jo Forrest, who presided over many of those funerals, said, “It seems wrong to calculate the percentage increase since last year, for these are names of beloved and not data points, but let us pause and recognize the breadth and depth of grief among us.” As a way of recognizing such grief, Forrest has joined the long line of clergy attentive to baptismal imagery at the time of death, incorporating baptismal promises into her many funeral homilies, dually affirming God’s love-that-bears-with-the-chaos for the one who has died and for those who grieve. Accompanying a body to its final resting place becomes an opportunity to publically remember, “we have washed the body of this loved one in baptism, fed this body at the Lord’s Table, prayed
together with the words of our mouths, joined hands with this one in service to the world in the name of Christ, and touched this person’s body in holy blessing and peace.”

Stone bowls of water and open graves full of dirt are in lockstep, proclaiming life beyond life.

**Story Nine: Toward a Critical Cycle of Action and Reflection**

Pointing to the church’s stone baptismal bowl during their Youth Sunday Sermons, graduating seniors often articulate the hoped-for narrative of children and youth ministries. They were baptized as infants at the font just feet from the pulpit where they stand on Youth Sunday, attended the church preschool, went to Sunday school, loved youth group, and served on mission trips. They showed up. They lived into their baptismal identity. Then, the church sends them off to college with a blessing. Presumably they return to Kenilworth Union for Christmas Eve, and might serve as college leaders on a summer High School mission trip. Beyond that, the narrative is unclear until they bring their own children forward for baptism, enacting the cycle of baptismal promises again across a new generation. The path toward participation is less paved for young adults in post-Christendom because of the lengthened process of “adulting,” the growing gap between leaving home and bearing children, and the trends of non-participation across their generation.

All that is certain is that those who grew up at the church will return in times of joy and sorrow: the wedding of a sibling or friend, the funeral of a godparent or God forbid a fellow college student, the high holy days of Christmas and Easter, the baptism of a nephew – all post-baptismal rituals proclaiming the gospel story. Compassionate participation will continue to mean co-suffering, bearing with the chaos, and growing up in God.

This orderly cycle of participation is what John Dominic Crossan might call *mythic*. Myth “establishes the world” of baptism and compassionate participation in the church community. Myth tells the hoped for baptismal story, like those told by graduating seniors on Youth Sunday.
The opposite of myth is parable, which “subverts” the carefully established world of *mythic* participation. If mythic participation means that *showing up* can foster faith, then parabolic participation turns that myth upside-down. *Parabolic* participation is the continued sorrow, depression and suicidal ideation of even the most active church members; *parabolic* participation is true faithfulness fostered in the least active, most over-programmed hockey-playing young people; *parabolic* participation is the critique of church participation in Christendom that reinforces cultural norms instead of offering radical Christ-like behavior. Crossan puts a finer point on the myth-parable dialectic divide: “You have built a lovely home, myth assures us: but, whispers parable, you are right above an earthquake fault.”

In baptism, it is no different.

Understanding baptism as equally myth and parable invites a cycle of action and reflection. The mythic narrative of baptism assures parents that if a child participates in church, “everything is going to be alright;” the myth of baptism is what causes churches to tweak curriculum or create mentoring programs in order to “dream and believe in a future that is better than the present.” Parabolic baptismal narratives, however “challenge and dispute” the well-formed myths, calling Christians “to confront the present, and deter us from trusting in any hope that does not face the hard reality of the present.” In the space between myth and parable, the church can articulate a fuller vision of the joy and struggle of baptismal identity. In hope, Christians accept the myth of participation: the baptized Christian community compassionately participates in each other’s lives at the corner of joy and sorrow, making an incarnate difference in God’s divine and dusty church. Simultaneously, with deep grace the church accepts the parable of baptism: God works, not just in the orderly administration of the sacraments or the over-programmed church context, but in the chaos of human life. This is the perpetual challenge, struggle and promise of baptismal identity.
Unmitigated Chaos and the Mystery of God

The scope of this project has been from beginning to end, from birth to death, from dust to dust. A Genesis one orientation to baptism is attuned to the life-long complexities of unmitigated chaos, understanding God’s spirit hovering there, replying to every kind of suffering with a tehomic love that bears with the primordial and cultural tohu va vohu. In the midst of a duck syndrome culture which perpetuates and co-creates the chaos of perfection, post-baptismal rituals teach counter-cultural spiritual practices – Sabbath, kerygmatic storytelling, intergenerational relationship, compassionate participation in one another’s and the world’s suffering. Equally, when chaos comes in the form of a teen suicide attempt, a couple’s miscarriage, a loved one gone too soon, or a spouse’s long-suffering death, post-baptismal rituals heal and offer a balm in Gilead.

While the culture-at-large views baptism narrowly as an ecclesial and spiritual practice for infants or the newly faithful, this project revealed that baptismal promises foster life in the face of chaos and death. Parents who live into their promise to teach Christian faith to their child and congregations who guide and nurture faithfully will find that compassionate participation, or co-suffering, produces the longed-for relationships of belonging that elicit a love that bears with the chaos. Post-baptismal rituals welcome this deeper growing up in God, allowing compassionate relationships to come to fruition, rehearsing God’s gospel promises, and reinforcing the promises made at the font. Whether the cultural chaos of a particular context is meaninglessness and suicidal ideation, violence and poverty, war and fear, or anything else that troubles human community, (1) baptism itself, (2) the promises made at the font, and (3) post-baptismal rituals in community offer endurance instead of denial and resilience instead of collapse. In the midst of such unmitigated chaos which cyclically carries faithful people away
from and toward the mystery of God at the font and in community, post-baptismal rituals that call for compassionate participation in the baptismal promises made at the water’s edge ultimately offer unmistakable evidence of a love that bears with the chaos, toward a deeper growing up in God.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


APPENDIX A

BEYOND DENOMINATIONALISM: A CHURCH HISTORY

Entering the sanctuary from the narthex, the first stained glass window at Kenilworth Union Church depicts the World Council of Churches *oikumene* symbol: a boat afloat on the sea of the world with a mast in the form of the cross. This early Christian symbol embodies the Kenilworth Union ethos, and connects the congregation to Christians around the globe; it expresses a core value – a shared hope for “unity, common witness and Christian service,” expressed by the global partners of the World Council of Churches.131

Kenilworth Union offers a distinctly independent theological character rooted in this sundry cluster of denominational identities. It is decidedly protestant in nature, ordinarily awash in the many streams of the reformed tradition. The church thrives because it allows for freedom of thought and welcomes a kaleidoscope of theological views while relying on God’s unifying presence within and beyond the community. The church weaves together two foundational theological statements, Christ’s call to “love God and neighbor” alongside the prophetic call to “do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with the Lord our God.”132

The church was organized in 1892, in the still-not-yet incorporated village of Kenilworth.133 The village founder, Joseph Sears, was instrumental in developing the church’s spirit and place. The plot of land for the church was donated by Sears as part of a two-hundred-acre planned community envisioned ten years earlier to include a school, a church, a railroad station and a store, not to mention those highly desired amenities we now take for granted, “water, gas, paved streets, sidewalks and sewage.”134

The church was organized without denominational loyalty because of the spirit of Sears’ own religious upbringing in the Swedenborgian tradition.135 Emanuel Swedenborg, the faith’s
founder, thought that denominations might dissolve if members of the church universal “made love to the Lord and charity toward their neighbor the principal point of faith.”\textsuperscript{136} In a newspaper article in 1899, the trustees rearticulated the aim of “the Union Church to welcome all denominations within its doors… to unite on Sunday morning in divine worship.”\textsuperscript{137} That spirit remains to this day.

This foundational hope for unity alongside its expressed theological diversity impacted the way baptismal practices emerged in its more than one-hundred-year history. The gift of the nondenominational context is that there is room to acknowledge and stand within the multiple streams of baptismal identity expressed within the Christian tradition, without straining to claim only one way of practicing baptism.

\textit{The Model Suburban Community}\textsuperscript{138}

Kenilworth Union Church is one of two churches in the Village of Kenilworth, tucked along the north shore of Lake Michigan, just a few miles outside the city of Chicago, and still within Metro-Chicago’s Cook County.\textsuperscript{139} While, in the beginning, it was a village church with members living within walking distance, the congregation is now made up of families who drive to church from all of the New Trier Township communities.

The financial, racial and family demographics shape the ministry at Kenilworth Union. Within a two-mile radius of the church, the average annual household income is $218,422, more than four times that of Cook County overall.\textsuperscript{140} Over sixty percent of the population within two miles of Kenilworth Union is part of what MissionInsite calls the \textit{Power Elite}, “the wealthiest households in the United States living in the most exclusive neighborhoods and enjoying all that life has to offer.” Ordinarily, this demographic finds meaning in congregations that help them “celebrate and express gratitude through acts of charity,” seeking churches that “maintain high
standards for the performing arts and strong teaching ministries,” both designations that Kenilworth Union could use to describe itself.\textsuperscript{141}

Racially, the area surrounding the church is overwhelmingly homogeneous; almost ninety percent of the population is white. Undoubtedly, the worshiping community is \textit{even more} homogenous, though there are no statistics on the racial makeup of Kenilworth Union. Despite the church’s concern for unity within diversity, Martin Luther King Junior’s words remain true today for Kenilworth Union, “at 11:00 a.m. on Sunday morning when we stand and sing that Christ has no east or west, we stand at the most segregated hour in this nation.”\textsuperscript{142}

The area surrounding the church attends to the needs of young families. School aged students who attend Kenilworth Union are typically part of the New Trier Township school district where the graduation rate is at ninety-eight percent, robust compared to Illinois’ eighty-six percent statewide. Even the most active children and youth at Kenilworth Union almost always prioritize academics, athletics and extra-curricular activities above church participation.\textsuperscript{143}

The religious diversity surrounding Kenilworth Union paints a picture that is not uncommon across much of the United States. While the area has a slightly higher overall Christian population than the US average, and the percent of people who profess no spiritual preference is slightly lower in the area than across the country, those who profess no spiritual preference have increased from twenty-one percent to twenty-five percent over the last ten years.

To reiterate, the area surrounding Kenilworth Union is four times as affluent as the wider Cook County context, ninety percent white, sixty-seven percent Christian, and more than half of the population is made up of families with school-aged children. The baptismal practices at
Kenilworth Union Church will be impacted by the wealth, race, religious histories and family demographics of the community and congregation.

Ministry at Kenilworth Union Church

Kenilworth Union Church is a corporate size church, hosting many micro-communities within the wider church. Membership is 2,814 with 1,386 families and an average worship attendance of 453. The chart below offers additional data to draw a picture of community life at Kenilworth Union Church.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Church Statistics</th>
<th>2014</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>20</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bible</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>55</td>
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<tr>
<td>Confirmation</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>54</td>
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<tr>
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<td>51</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>31</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>Funeral</td>
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Meaningful, sustained involvement begins on Sunday morning. Adults worship for one hour with a sermon and choral music as the central worship experience. Starting at age three, children attend chapel where they sing songs, learn prayers, hear Bible stories and enact sacred rituals. Chapel is accompanied by a thirty-minute Sunday school classroom experience where children use art, prayer and conversation to further explore the story told in chapel.

Youth in fifth to eighth grade are invited to gather on Wednesday nights for youth group, where alongside goofy fun that often includes whipped cream or running loudly through the sanctuary (and thankfully not both at the same time), they gather for prayer and honest conversation about the rough edges and brokenness in their own lives and the world around them. Freshmen through seniors in high school have multiple chances to confront the paradox of encountering the divine and dusty world through service and leadership: singing in the choir, teaching Sunday school, serving as youth group leaders, and doing service at the church, in the city and internationally.
This landscape is not atypical, but a variation of what has been typical in children and youth ministry in suburban white upper and middle class protestant churches for a few decades. Given the protestant decline described below, the landscape of children and youth ministry begs the question, “what will foster meaningful, sustained, faithful involvement in the decades to come?” Since baptism is often the first time a child attends worship, it is the beginning of faith formation and therefore the beginning of meaningful, sustained involvement in the church community. Baptism, then, is a starting point for reframing the whole congregation’s understanding of and active participation in children and youth ministry.

*Toward a Shared Future: A Ministry to Children and Youth*

I have served as a pastor at Kenilworth Union Church for children and youth ministries since November of 2013. I serve with Bill Evertsberg, the primary preacher who began in March of 2014, and Jo Forrest, pastor for congregational care. Forrest is the most tenured pastor, having served since 2012, and all three of us come from the Presbyterian Church (USA).

The newness of the pastoral team dominates the current narrative of Kenilworth Union because for almost four decades, Kenilworth Union experienced extraordinary leadership continuity under the care of Gil Bowen, senior pastor for thirty-seven years. This era of stability was accompanied by leadership from Bowen’s daughter, serving as the director of the church preschool for seventeen years, and a parishioner, serving as the Children’s Director for sixteen years.

The senior minister to follow Bowen, Andrew Chaney, served for a comparatively short period of just four years, preaching his last sermon on Christmas Eve of 2012. Additionally, in the time of transition leading up to and following Chaney’s departure, all of the pastoral staff left, the person directing the preschool changed once, and the person directing children’s
ministry changed twice in that time, causing heartache and leadership challenges. In the wake of these transitions, the church board shifted the responsibilities for my position to include not just youth and family ministry, but also children’s ministry and a formal relationship with the church preschool.

With this bird’s eye view of ministry from cradle to college, I see my role as direct ministry to children and youth and strategic pastoral leadership with staff, parents and volunteers. My role includes welcoming babies, nurturing the faith of preschoolers, telling God’s story to elementary aged children, creating faithful community with middle school students, serving Christ alongside teenagers, discerning God’s path with college students, walking with parents as they develop new ways of sharing their faith with their children, and nurturing a resilient staff. It is no accident that I would choose baptism as a thesis topic: my ministry begins with a child when one or two parents decide to bring their child forward for baptism. Since a child’s baptism is often the first time the child enters the sanctuary, I do not want it to be the last.
APPENDIX B

BAPTISM HISTORY AT KENILWORTH UNION CHURCH

Given my hope for active participation in the promises of baptism, it is important to note that sacraments at Kenilworth Union Church had a slow start. While the church began worshiping in 1892, church records show that the church’s first communion service was not held until twelve years later, in 1904, when the second pastor, Dr. Horswell, was serving full time. It was another fourteen years until the first baptism in 1918; Martha Roberts (Seipp) was baptized with Rev. David Beaton presiding as pastor. Based on this data, sacraments were not central to the life of the church in its initial worship life together.

After the first baptism in 1918, there were no subsequent baptisms until 1924, and fewer than twenty baptisms per year until just after World War II. The number of baptisms peak at the height of the baby boom in 1951 with forty-five baptized that year, followed by an average of twenty-one baptisms per year from 1952-1970. The number of baptisms per year drops significantly in the nineteen seventies with a low of three baptisms in 1974 as the congregation is adjusting to the pastoral transition between Dr. Hodgson’s twenty-five-year leadership from 1944-1969 and Dr. Bowen’s thirty-seven-year leadership from 1970-2007. Then, throughout the eighties and nineties, the number of baptisms per year quadruples. In 1992 and 1994, there are two peak years of baptisms, with 101 and 121 respectively. Since the year 1994, the number of baptisms decreased rather consistently until 2013, when there were 20 baptisms, the lowest number since 1980. In 2014 there were 26 baptisms, and it is unknown at this point if the higher
number points to a new pattern of growth or not.

While congregations and clergy, myself included, sometimes bemoan number-counting, claiming that numbers do not matter in light of God's transformative presence, even the writers of the Acts of the Apostles participated in this work of soul-counting, naming more than three thousand people baptized on the day of Pentecost. The early church took these numbers as a mark of faithfulness growing among God's people. I share the baptism numbers from Kenilworth Union Church in the spirit of the day of Pentecost because the numbers tell their own compelling stories.

Given that almost three thousand people have been baptized at Kenilworth Union Church in the past century, and given that Kenilworth Union Church expresses a distinctly nondenominational theological identity, I wonder how diverse the baptismal practices have been? Have there been distinct theological conversations about the wide range of images when talking about baptism? Have the baptismal practices simply mirrored the traditions out of which presiding clergy have come? As I collect stories about baptisms at Kenilworth Union, answers to these questions will reveal the church’s theology and practice of baptism.

Baptism and the ‘Nones’

The baptism numbers reveal some extraordinary, though possibly not unique, growth at Kenilworth Union Church in the eighties and nineties while the subsequent decline from the
nineties into the new millennia mirrors the common narrative of decline so well-articulated across our nation since the nineties until today. The Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life brought to light new data that indicates that the last two decades of decline in church participation was no longer just a myth; there was nationwide data to confirm that adults were abandoning church participation, and often wholly rejecting Christianity as a label to meaningfully describe themselves. While participation in baptism is not addressed in this study, it seems reasonable to assume that if adults are not participating in church worship, they will likely also not be bringing their children forward for baptism, though it is possible that church participation and baptism do not strictly correlate.

Building on Pew’s research in her book *Christianity After Religion*, Diana Butler Bass talks at length about the data on an emerging cohort of religiously unaffiliated adults who now make up America's third largest 'religious group.' This group is referred to as the 'nones;' those who identify as atheists, agnostics, secular humanists or even 'nothing in particular.' Based on the local demographic information above, there is a rising population of ‘nones’ claiming no spiritual preference who make up twenty-five percent of adults living in the area surrounding Kenilworth Union.148

In light of the growing cohort of ‘nones,’ who is bringing their children forward for baptism and who is not? Are there fewer children not being brought forward for baptism because their parents claim no spiritual preference, are today’s infants simply being baptized elsewhere, or demographically, are fewer infants being born in the area? How many parents who might claim to be 'nones' are, in fact, bringing their children forward for baptism because of pressure from their own parents? What does all of this say about the challenges of baptism at Kenilworth
Union Church now? Listening for this information throughout the narratives I collect will impact pre-baptism education as well as post-baptism guiding and nurturing.

In his book *American Religion*, Mark Chaves identifies several markers in religious participation that might be at work at Kenilworth Union. He traces the roots of liberal protestant decline to (1) lower birth rates within families from the liberal protestant traditions over several generations, (2) lower participation by youth leading to decreased participation when those youth become adults and (3) decreased pressure for conservative protestants to change to liberal protestant denominations when they experience upward economic mobility (4) fewer current adults having grown up in active Christian households. While Chaves is not addressing baptism explicitly, the factors that contributed to the decline in baptisms at Kenilworth Union in the late nineties through today are likely associated with the general trend of liberal protestant decline.
Letter to the Congregation

February 28, 2015

Water. We need it to survive. Humans can live for up to three weeks without food, but only three days without water. It is essential to our physical being. Water, unsurprisingly, is also essential to our faith. Whether you were baptized as a child or an adult, by sprinkling or dunking, in a church or down by the river, it is by water and the Holy Spirit that we are incorporated into the body of Christ. In the waters of baptism, we are named and claimed by God.

It is easy to be enamored with baptism because the babies are cooing or crying and are a gosh darn adorable gift from God. But what is it, really, that brings us to the font? And why does this practice of water and prayer take on such meaning and power in our lives? What would we do without water? We will explore this and more, Sunday morning (at 9 a.m. in the centennial room) as part of our Faith Conversation series on Sacraments.

In Christ,

Reverend Katie Snipes Lancaster

Associate Minister of Youth and Families
A Letter to the Congregation

Tohu-Va-Vohu Identity

February 9, 2015

My pastoral identity is shaped by tohu-va-vohu. Chaos, that is. Tohu-va-vohu, a Hebrew word from the first chapter of Genesis, is thought to be a nonsense word – like gobbledygook. It is sometimes translated as ‘formlessness,’ or an ‘unformed emptiness.’ It is this shapelessness that, in fact, gives shape to my pastoral identity.

On the one hand, tohu-va-vohu is the crabby, irritable part of parish ministry. It is that unearthly array of clutter on the surface of your desk. It is the head-spinning work of ‘managing expectations’ – like the classic work of helping a parishioner see that it is okay to find a visitor in ‘their’ pew, or carefully disclosing the hard truth that tiny shifts to the worship bulletin do not mean that God is poof gone. Tohu-va-vohu is what makes you, as a pastor, feel like you are watching the reality TV show Parishioners Behaving Badly, instead of what you thought you’d see at church back when you were an idyllic seminarian – the Body of Christ living into God’s call. Tohu-va-vohu will eat up and spit out clergy like nobody’s business.

On the other hand, tohu-va-vohu is the reason we do parish ministry. It is the somber chaos of cancer creeping into another life, and the hushed conversation about a miscarriage or a teen suicide attempt. It is what leaves men and woman homeless, helpless or hurting. It is global poverty and drought and abuse. Tohu-va-vohu is what causes the prophets to plead: “care for the orphans and the widows and the strangers” and “do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.”
Formed by all this, my prayers begin at chaos. This emerging prayer practice is evidence that the communion litany is seeping into my soul, rooting me in its sweeping narrative of salvation that begins with God’s spirit hovering over the chaos. Serving communion on Sunday mornings for six years has washed me in the watery chaos, created a tohu-vahu identity, so to speak. But, the week-in, week-out experience of parish ministry itself has also called me to pray, “God, let your spirit hover over the chaos of our lives.”

From the chaos, somehow, trustingly, I can finally hear the rest of Genesis chapter one. God speaks into the chaos and separates the chaos into the poetry of sunrise and moonrise, that liminal space between land and lake, the cacophony of birds squawking and frogs croaking, and so on.

In this ancient creation story that I love, the universe begins with a voice that calls order into the chaos; a voice that undoes the darkness calling out ‘let there be light’ and the light shines in the darkness and the darkness would not overcome it.

Walter Brueggemann writes that in Genesis 1, “God and God’s creation are bound together by the powerful, gracious movement of God toward that creation… and the binding is irreversible. God has decided it… and the mode of that binding is speech.”

Maybe you already know the binding power of speech, having been offered a job, or received a phone call on your admittance to university, or conducted important business face-to-face; a word and a handshake become the most solid of contracts.

Or, conversely, maybe you have experienced the diluted power of speech in our country, where we are overloaded with sound bites and exist in a culture of its-gotta-be-in-writing-before-it-can-be-believed.
But, in an oral culture like the ancient near east, out of which our scriptures come, in this my-word-is-my-deed kind of culture, the power of speech is irreplaceable. It binds together, creates covenant, makes meaning, is legally binding and profoundly life changing. It is in the chaos that God binds us together with a word, untangles us and makes promises to us – that more life might come.

And so, my pastoral identity is formed by the formless tohu-va-vohu, for that is where God speaks.

_Katie Snipes Lancaster was dedicated at her grandmother’s the Disciples of Christ congregation in Crawfordsville, Indiana, baptized in the United Church of Christ in Midland, Michigan, and confirmed and ordained in the Presbyterian Church USA in Indianapolis. She quickly identified with the ecumenical roots of Kenilworth Union Church, a congregation in Chicago’s northern suburbs, where she serves as pastor. Alongside parish ministry, she is an aspiring bee keeper, soon-to-be mandolin player and avid follower of YouTube’s VlogBrothers, SciShow and CrashCourse._
A Letter to the Congregation

February 17, 2015

Dear Friends,

For Silvi Pirn, your Director of Youth Ministries, food and ministry go hand in hand, but maybe not in the way you might expect. Yes, youth ministry is undeniably reliant on pizza and unnaturally orange snacks; Doritos and Cheetos really seem to make a difference to Middle Schoolers somehow. But, for Silvi, the food analogy goes one step further; she compares youth ministry, particularly youth mission trips, to tasting new food.

Have you ever tried to invite someone to eat a new food? In a conversation this weekend, Silvi described to me how she has helped people taste new food. She would first describe what the food tastes like (imagining). Then, she might have you taste the food, and while you are tasting it, she would describe again what you are tasting (guided experience). Finally, she might ask you to describe what you tasted (reflection).

This cycle of (1) imagining, (2) guided experience and (3) reflection is important. This cycle is why a short three-day mission trip to Hollywood, where 12 and 13 year olds serve our country’s largest homeless population can be both generative and foundational.

- Even before our students embark on our trip, they get to imagine and talk about what God’s love is like, what God’s call on our lives might be – much like hearing the description of an unfamiliar food before it even hits their mouths.
• During the trip, they experience God through guided experience, actually living out God’s love and God’s call, much like tasting that new food and finding out that the food is much like it was described – wonderful and complex.

• And finally, they have chances on their trip and afterward, to reflect on what it was like to experience God’s wonderful and complex community.

Jesus’ words (those same words that these youth memorized when they were in third grade) come to life: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.” I am grateful for the faithful women (yes, it happened to be an all-girls team traveling to Hollywood) who I was able to travel with on our President’s Day Weekend Mission Trip, and I am humbled by their courage to try a new food, so-to-speak.

Yours,

Katie Snipes Lancaster
Letter to the Congregation

March 18, 2015

Dear Friends:

Adult-ing: the process of becoming an adult. The work of adult-ing is long and difficult; learning how to take care of yourself, leaving home, figuring out what you are passionate about, finding a way to support yourself. None of this happens alone, it happens with the support of family, close friends, and trusted communities. The Church is one of those trusted communities, and in the rite of confirmation we affirm that God is part of this process of adult-ing.

In confirmation, 9th graders are recognized as adult members of Kenilworth Union Church, and they confirm the vows made at their baptism. They are reminded again that they belong to God, no matter where they are in life’s journey. Pray for this year’s 9th graders as they prepare their faith statements and prayerfully move toward their day of confirmation.

Peace,

Reverend Katie Snipes Lancaster
Letter to the Congregation

April 16, 2015

Dear Friends of Kenilworth Union Church,

Confirmation is this weekend; a chance for ninth graders to affirm the promises made at their baptism and to join Kenilworth Union Church as adult members, fully engaged in their faith journey. Confirmation has been the Church’s chance to partner with these young people in community, prayer, theology and service.

Together, you participated with them in over 150 hours of service, 400 hours of worship. The saying, “it takes a village” is most certainly true in this situation. But, here’s the challenge: our partnership with these young people does not end when they participate in the rite of confirmation. They are your neighbors, your family members, fellow church members. How will you invite them into the important work of loving God and neighbor?

Thanks be to God for this community of faith,

Reverend Katie Snipes Lancaster

Associate Minister of Youth and Families
Letter to the Congregation

May 13, 2015

Dear Friends of Kenilworth Union Church,

Do you remember where you were in 1996 and 1997? In those two years, Kenilworth Union Church welcomed a total of 158 infants, children and adults in the sacrament of baptism. If you are a parent or grandparent of the following children of this church, you may remember a particular day, a particular baptism, a particular moment of water and God’s spirit: Matthew, Katherine, John, Samantha, Emma, James, Patrick, Sarah, Andrew, and Margaret.\(^{150}\)

Of course, the above list is only a fraction of those baptized at the time, but in particular, they are names I recognized, names of young people who will likely be present in worship this Sunday as seniors graduating from high school. They will greet you, they will lead you in worshiping God, they will tell their story, they will sing God’s story. They do this because this Sunday is Youth Sunday; a time for graduating seniors to give thanks to God for their lives and for you – their church; a time for us – their church – to prayerfully send them off into the many new adventures that lay ahead of them.

Now, two names in that list stuck out to me: James and Andrew.\(^{151}\) Both were baptized as children, not infants, and are older: both now serve as young adult leaders of our youth ministry programs. James leads youth groups and Andrew leads mission trips. It is incredible to see them grow into God’s promises made at baptism and to live into God’s call on their lives to love and serve. Their service as young adults is part of what strengthens and enlivens the Kenilworth Union Church youth ministry.
With gratitude for those named and not named, for all those who graduate and all those who make our youth ministry possible,

Reverend Katie Snipes Lancaster

Associate Minister of Youth and Families
Dear Friends of Kenilworth Union Church,

To me, summer is about water. It is about traveling to the water’s edge. As a kid, summer meant being toe to toe with Lake Michigan, dangling my feet over the edge of a little bridge over the creek by my house, or diving into the neighborhood pool for early morning swim practice.

This summer and into the fall, I am collecting water, photos and stories for my Doctor of Ministry thesis on Baptism. My hope is that, with your help, we can visually and tangibly explore God’s water promises to us, and share the places where God has met us — the Kenilworth Union Church community — at the water’s edge. Would you collect some water? Would you submit a photo? Would you share a story?

- **Photos** can be of (1) your baptism, or a family member’s baptism (2) any sacred place at the water’s edge where you have encountered God.
- **Water** can be from anywhere: a lake, river or ocean; a rainstorm; the drinking fountain at a favorite place, from school or work or church, from the faucet at your home or the home of someone you love. I even have special travel size containers for the water, if you would like one, just ask.
- **Stories** can be about (1) meeting God at the waters edge, (2) the story of your baptism or a family members baptism, (3) or a special connection to a story from scripture about water or baptism.
The Kenilworth Union Church board has already begun to submit photos and stories. The IMPACT Mission Trip and Vacation Bible School participants have already begun to collect water. I hope you will join in this water project!

May God be with you, wherever you go,

Rev. Katie Snipes Lancaster

Associate Pastor for Children and Youth Ministry
Letter to the Congregation

November 13, 2014

Dear Kenilworth Union Church:

A mother I know had this conversation with her preschooler the other day.

Kiddo: How did the neighbor’s dog get to heaven?
Mamma: Well, she died.
Kiddo: I know that. But how did she get to heaven?
Mamma, inwardly panicking: Well, how do you think she got there?
Kiddo: In a car. There are separate cars for people and dogs. One is pink and one is purple. They are big cars, so that everyone can fit in. God picks you up, and then keeps you.

Who could deny this child her eschatological vision, her hoped for glimpse into God’s heavenly realm full of pink and purple cars for puppies and people alike? At church and at home, this child has been allowed to wonder about God, not just in times of joy and gratitude, but in times of loss and sadness, like when her neighbor’s dog died. In the midst of her imagining God’s heavenly transportation system, she has expressed part of our core theological identity: that in life and in death, God picks you up and keeps you. Surely her vision comes, not just because she has a beautifully wild theological imagination, but because she, too, has experienced the love of God who “picks you up, and then keeps you.”

At Kenilworth Union Church, part of the way that this congregation experiences the wide love of our God who “picks you up, and then keeps you” is through our Stephen Ministry. Stephen Ministers are members of our congregation who have been specially trained to support people in need – experiencing the loss of a loved one, hospitalization, separation or divorce, terminal illness, loneliness, unemployment, life transitions or a family crisis. They are there for
you in those times of loss and sadness when you most need to be wrapped up in God’s love, when you most need someone to be by your side to hear your story.

When we gather this Sunday to worship our God, the One who “picks you up, and then keeps you,” we will celebrate our Stephen Ministers. I hope you will join us in gratitude for their ministry among us.

Yours,

Rev. Katie Snipes Lancaster

Associate Minister
Colleges call it Duck Syndrome, but it is by no means limited to the university context. Duck Syndrome is that well known pressure to appear "effortlessly perfect": smart, accomplished, fit, beautiful and popular, all without visible effort. Our culture calls us to be like ducks; gliding calmly across the waters of life, while hiding beneath the surface just how frantically and relentlessly we are paddling. The duck life is hard for all of us, most certainly for our teenagers, but also for any of us who feel like wearing a mask is the only option, or hiding our struggle is the only way.

The Paris attacks might be the very thing to remind us that life is more precious than perfection, and to show us that our own imperfections are small compared to the deepest sorrows of the world. However, what if, in some ways, the Paris attacks reinforce our Duck Syndrome, causing us think that if we are smart enough, accomplished enough, good enough, that we can rid the world of all violence and evil?

Maybe, as Christians, we are called to yet another way - not to hide our struggles below the surface like a duck or hide in shame because of our imperfections, but instead to share our vulnerabilities with God, to confess even our deepest mistakes to the One-who-forgives, and to boldly go out to love our neighbor and even our enemy.
We are about to enter the season of Advent. Candles will be lit in worship, prophetic scripture will be read, and hope will be named. We will read about that hoped for day when God will establish peace; "they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks" We will join the millennia of ancient people crying out for the day when "nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

I witnessed a little boy at the store tug on his mom's jacket and say, "Why are there Christmas decorations out, Christmas is still a long way off?" And, he couldn't be more right, but Advent, our season of waiting is about to begin. Our prayers these days are truly advent prayers, waiting prayers, longing prayers, saying, "O Lord, how long?"

Let us gather together in these days of waiting, for prayer and hope and a community in which to know and experience God-in-our-midst.

Rev. Katie Snipes Lancaster
APPENDIX D:

PREACHING AND BAPTISMAL IDENTITY

LUKE 2:22–40

Seen, Called, Noticed

February 1, 2015

Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God — Luke 2:27–28.

Christmas comes to an end tomorrow. Tomorrow. You knew that right? I hope you haven’t packed up your Christmas tree yet. This little gem of a gospel story that we just heard: it is the reason that tomorrow is the end of Christmas, because in some of our ancient Christian traditions, this text does, indeed, mark the end of the Christmas season. Typically, yes, we end Christmas at Epiphany, celebrating the Magi, the wise men from the east, bringing gold, frankincense and myrrh to Jesus. But tomorrow, February 2, is a little Christian feast day called Candlemas, or “Presentation of the Lord” day. It is celebrated 40 days after Christmas and recognizes this scripture passage when, in the gospel of Luke, and only in the gospel of Luke, we see Mary and Jesus bringing Jesus to the temple for the required post-birth holy rituals.

See, on the one hand, Mary has to be made pure after childbirth, and this 40th day symbolically marks the time when she can be made fully reintegrated into society as a new mother. It would line up, for us, with a baby’s first doctor visit or a postpartum check in, but in
Mary’s context, the purpose of the visit is not medical but spiritual. On the other hand, this 40th day journey happens because baby Jesus needs to be presented at the temple to be redeemed. Yes, Jesus needs to be redeemed. It does seem odd, doesn’t it, to think of our redeemer, Jesus, needing to be redeemed. But, according to the religious order of things, all first born sons technically belonged to God, and instead of being required to give your first born son over to God as a sacrifice, you can opt to “redeem” your son by a monetary payment. Though, listening to this text closely, it is no accident here that Luke echoes redemption so early on in his telling of Jesus’ story.

Our narrator, Luke, is quite the story weaver, and he is setting you up to hear this story poetically, on multiple levels. If you are a first century Jew reading this story, you don’t miss this detail — pointing from Jesus’ birth all the way to his redeeming death and resurrection. Our Easter promises swing round to Christmas incarnations, and this text wraps us up in both Christmas and Easter; Christ as light and life, savior and redeemer.

After their trip to the temple, Mary and Joseph can join in the modern lament that “children are expensive.” Mary has had to pay for this postpartum purification ritual — paying two turtledoves instead of the more costly lamb, proof of her poverty. And then she pays again, 5 shekels this time, or about 50 bucks, to redeem her first born son. It has been quite the costly trip to the temple for these new parents.

But the temple story doesn’t end there. Simeon, a righteous and devout man, was walking through the temple just at the moment when Mary and Joseph were walking through the doors, having done what was customary under the law. It was no accident, though, that Simeon comes across Mary and Joseph with their infant son Jesus. This is, if you can imagine it, a temple
complex full of buildings and courtyards that is likely some 35 acres in total. Simeon didn’t just happen across them in the temple complex. Simeon was led there by the Holy Spirit.

Simeon, unknown to us except for in this passage, takes 40 day old baby Jesus into his arms and praises God. Borrowing poetry from the prophet Isaiah, Simeon sings a faithful hymn to God at this moment saying, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation.” Mary and Joseph were amazed. Amazed, but not surprised or shocked. They were certainly not taken aback at this stranger, a just and prayerful man, yes, but a stranger nonetheless, taking their son into his arms.

Mary and Joseph have incrementally been getting used to odd things happening. Earlier that year, Mary had been visited by an angel, you know the story. The angel who visited her said she was going to conceive a child by the Holy Spirit and bear a son, Jesus, who would be the Son of the Most High God. Then, nine short months later, when Mary and her soon-to-be-but-not-yet husband were far from home, Mary gave birth to this child.

Soon, shepherds arrived, saying that angels had visited them, too. The angels had instructed these terrified shepherds to trust and follow, using a star as their guide. And, under that star, they would find a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and laying in a manger. Terrified, they followed, and amazed, they found him. This child, the angel had said, would be a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. And there he was, with Mary and Joseph in the manger.

For Mary and Joseph, these surprises were no longer quite such a surprise. They were all part of a longer narrative that was bringing them to a new understanding about this child in their midst. Simeon didn’t surprise them by praising God for their child, but they were amazed — an utterly different kind of emotion.
I love these first two chapters of Luke; the surprises, the angels, the visits, the travel. It is from these early stories that my whole geography of the holy lands was first knit together; Nazareth, Bethlehem and Jerusalem all became familiar first, and then they got knit in with Judea, Galilee and the City of David. A map emerges.

Ken Jennings, jeopardy winner 10 years back, and a map enthusiast like myself, tells a charming story in his book *Maphead* about how enthralled he used to be with the color maps in the pew Bibles at church — how the maps captured his attention. Each map with a journey, and each journey overlapping the Ancient Near East in different ways as the holy lands shifted power over the centuries from Assyrian to Babylonian to Persian to Greek and finally to Roman rule; all the while, God using the widest array of people to tell the story of salvation.

It is remarkable how much travel Jesus did, even in those first 40 infant days, to unveil the story of God’s salvation. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, named and dedicated in the temple in Jerusalem, and then, finally, at the end of today’s story, having finished everything required by the Law of the Lord, he was able to return for the first time to his home town of Nazareth.

The pew Bibles should have a map in them for you to trace Jesus’ journey, but if they don’t I can guarantee you that any of our 5 and 6 graders who have been around here these last few weeks can draw you a simple map of the holy lands after having done so on a larger scale in preparation for their Bible Habitat exhibit in the coming weeks.

This infant travel narrative — Bethlehem to Jerusalem to Nazareth — is unique to the gospel of Luke. Mark foregoes or forgets Jesus’ infancy and childhood all together. John more poetically crafts the story of Jesus’ birth from before the beginning of creation, and so skips over the manger scenes, and Matthew, of course, gives us the wise men.
But it is Luke who gives us Mary’s *Magnificat*, and the Innkeeper and the Manger and the Shepherds. And it is Luke who gives us the Angel Gabriel who reminds us, along with Mary, that “nothing is impossible with God.”

It is with this in mind, that *nothing* is impossible with God, that Luke records the good news of Jesus Christ. Luke is taking extraordinary discretion when setting up this narrative account of Jesus. Luke is careful to bring us along, showing us, the reader, step by step, who Jesus is. Luke calls us toward God with this orderly account, giving us confidence to trust and know God. Luke shows us Christ, gives us multiple ways to notice Jesus as Christ, and calls us toward Christ, even here in these early infant travel narratives.

Here Jesus is seen, not in the private impromptu gathering of shepherds around a manger, but more publically, in the temple. Jesus is met first, by Simeon, with his robust hymn-like song of praise to God, and then, by Anna, an 84 year old prophet who approaches the holy family at that very same moment and notices Jesus. Recognizing him, she also praises God, telling everyone that he will redeem Jerusalem. On the very day when Jesus’ parents have just done this legal work of “redeeming” Jesus at the temple, Anna is here praising God and saying that Jesus will be the one, the One who will redeem Jerusalem.

Luke is showing us, layer upon layer, that Jesus is and will be the Savior, the Messiah. Here at the temple, Luke is calling us to notice Mary and Joseph. They are doing the things that all parents do — like going to the temple with your infant on his 40th day — *just as* faithfully as they are doing the scary things that other parents *didn’t* have to do — like traveling as a young pregnant woman with the man you are about to marry — to his home town — a man who is not yet your husband, nor is he the father of the child you are expecting.
Mary and Joseph are faithful in these normal things that all parents do, as well as the extraordinary things. In the same way, Luke is calling us to see that the Holy Spirit is just as present in the early Angelic appearances to Mary and the Shepherds, as in this Holy Spirit-enabled encounter between Simeon, Anna and Jesus that day.

This story, short and unassuming as it is, is so compelling. On the one hand, it is a reminder to us that we can faithfully live out our lives, both in the ordinary everyday expectations of life, and in the scary unknown. On the other hand, it is a reminder that the Holy Spirit is just as present with us in our heightened spiritual experiences, as in the seemingly random, but truly Holy Spirit-enabled unexpected encounters with kind strangers or new friends.

Additionally, I hear this text through the echo chamber of Children and Youth Ministry. As churches across the country try to figure out what ministry will look like in the next 50 years, one of the constant questions is, of course, how to minister to children and youth in this constantly changing youth culture. Recently, academics out of Princeton Seminary on the East Coast have been claiming that parents are the key influencers to faith formation for young people. Parents must take the responsibility of nurturing faith in their families. Meanwhile and concurrently, academics at California’s Fuller Seminary on the West Coast alternatively claim that mentors and intergenerational relationships outside of the family are key influencers to faithfulness. The East Coast is claiming parents and home faith formation as key, and the West Coast is claiming that mentors and non-parent intergenerational relationships as key to building up the body of Christ from a young age.

I see today’s passage as a call to stand in-between these East Coast and West Coast philosophies. Maybe it is because we are here in Chicago, literally between the East and West coast, but nonetheless, I believe this passage is telling us to stand in-between. This passage tells
me that parents must faithfully bring their children to sacred places where they can then build those key intergenerational relationships.

Why? Mary and Joseph bring their child to the temple, and there, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus encounters older adults, grandparent-aged caring adults who see, notice and call Jesus by name.

Yes, there are many parts to this story that are pointing to the uniqueness of Jesus as our Lord and Savior, but the basics of the encounter — two parents, bringing their child to a sacred place for a holy ritual, and through the Holy Spirit, encountering two deeply spiritual older adults who could care about and praise God for their child — that, that is what church is all about.

That is what we are called to do: to build our own faith by praising God, and to build up the faithfulness of the next generation by allowing them to see such faithfulness, and to praise God alongside us. There are many gifts to this story, of course, and I will end with this one. In C. S. Lewis’ *Chronicles of Narnia*, the White Witch had cursed all of Narnia so that it was, quote, “always winter and never Christmas.” I always hated that: “always winter and never Christmas.”

So, in my mind, on this snowy day, I can claim that, in fact, here in the midst of a February snowstorm, that it is both Christmas and winter, since, by celebrating the Presentation of the Lord’s day this February gives us an excuse to extend our Christmas celebrations just a little longer. May this story be a blessing. May it connect you back to our highest of holy days, Christmas, reminding you that Christ is our light in the darkness and the darkness shall not overcome it, and connecting you forward to that Easter morning when Christ will be, to all the people, Savior, Redeemer and Lord.

In Jesus Christ, Amen.
Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him — Luke 24:31

It is now the third Sunday after Easter; two weeks ago, we gathered for “the big day.” Some of us got up early and went down to the beach to sing with the sunrise, all of God’s creation — dogs included — echoing the same melody of resurrection and new life; others dressed up in Sunday-best, gathering in a sanctuary here or there. Families worshiped in practically every corner of the globe, and afterward a feast was laid out, lamb or ham, hot cross buns or Cadbury eggs.

The story was the same on Easter Sunday this year as it is every year (I’m not even sure what would happen if we told a different story on Easter Sunday; I’m guessing none of us are willing to experiment on that one…). And so, the Easter story went like this: on the third day, when the women went to prepare Jesus’ body for burial, they found that his tomb was empty.

Shocking news, yes? They had gone to plan a funeral, and ended up planning an investigation into theft. Or was it theft? The men at the tomb (were they angels? Luke doesn’t make this completely clear) ask “why are you looking for the living among the dead?” as if they know something more, but won’t tell.

I’m not sure the disciples were ready for any more surprises or secrets or unexpected news, but as Easter day turns to afternoon, two disciples depart for the nearby town of Emmaus,
barely as far as downtown Evanston is from here, and as they walk, they encounter a man also walking along.

Our narrator, Luke, lets us, the reader, in on the secret early; this man is Jesus, but the disciples do not recognize him yet, and they won’t until the day is almost done. When Jesus asked them what they were talking about, the disciples were taken aback that this man did not know what had taken place in Jerusalem that week.

You’ve been in situations like this, thinking that surely everyone had heard the news that the Boston Marathon or Oklahoma City had been bombed, or that a Germanwings plane had crashed, or that a boat sank off the coast of Libya or South Korea, or a hurricane hit the coast of New Orleans. How could someone not know? And so, the disciples tell Jesus what happened: that their friend, mentor, prophet, their hope for the future, had been sentenced to death on a cross, that they laid him in a tomb, that his body had turned up missing just that morning, and that this One who could have redeemed all of Israel, who had turned their lives upside down and offered them a way toward new life, was not just dead, but gone. Not even a funeral could be held.

They rehearse the story that we tell on Easter Sunday; they tell this story, not to just any stranger, but to Jesus himself, and they still do not recognize him until they sit down together for an evening meal. It is at these surprise feasts that we recognize and encounter God in Jesus Christ. For example, in my last semester of college, I had the opportunity to study Early Christian History in Italy. Our assignment was to choose a topic, a theme of sorts, to explore throughout our travels, and while my classmates choose more academic and studious topics, I choose food as my theme.
My dad, of course, would say this is a classic Snipes way to travel; he remembers every trip he ever took based on what he ate while he was there. I thought I was being clever, really. Food, in Italy? I’d taste all the seafood and pasta, pizza and gelato, and maybe find a way to weave in some coursework before I had to return home. Studying food in Italy was just the level of academic rigor I was looking for.

Yet, I accidentally stumbled upon a different kind of feast. The food was good, yes. But as we visited museum and mausoleum, crypt and catacomb and cathedral, I wandered Italy in awe. Whether it was an ancient tomb or a fresco in an old monastery, each one had a feast. Not actual food, but food in art. The Italian art work depicted banquets and dinners, people gathered around a table, loaves of bread and glasses of wine, even wheat stalks and grape vines repeated throughout the country; painted in catacombs, etched in stone, depicted in mosaic and gold on the ceilings of churches. Some of you have probably seen this, I’m sure.

In the oldest pieces of early Christian art, most times, it was unclear exactly which story was being depicted; was it the feast from that crowded day when Jesus was multiplying the loaves and the fishes, or the last supper with Jesus in that intimate upper room, or maybe this story, today’s story, when Jesus’ disciples went to Emmaus, and were caught unaware by the presence of Jesus sharing bread with them?

But, in Early Christian Art, I was beginning to learn, the banquet was more symbol than story, or rather, the feast was a symbol that tied up multiple stories in one. Each feast etched in stone or painted in a catacomb was visually offering us the full story of Jesus, interpreting God to us through the most recognizable, tangible part of our day —dinner — the most mundane part of our day, even.
The visual exegesis depicted feast after feast, telling the widest possible version of God’s love; that in the most difficult times, when it seemed all was lost – whether there seemed there wasn’t enough food to go around, or a friend was saying goodbye, or a loved one had died – God offered us a feast that transcended tragedy. Artists were reminding us God’s good news. Frederick Buechner would say it this way: “the worst isn’t the last thing about the world. It's the next to the last thing. The last thing is the best. It's the power from on high that comes down into the world, that wells up from the rock-bottom worst of the world like a hidden spring.”¹⁵⁴

Like early Christian artists, our Gospel writer, Luke, is as Fred Craddock would say, “communicator with a purpose.”¹⁵⁵ Luke is trying to reach us, his reader. Luke did not sketch this story out haphazardly on a coffee shop napkin, nor did he type it out quickly on his iPhone while trying to multitask. Luke is anticipating exactly how he will tell this delicate post-resurrection story while keeping you, his audience, alert and engaged. This is no ordinary novel; it is not fiction for the sake of entertainment. Luke is laying out an orderly account of the events that took place for the sake of those who love God.

You can practically feel Luke’s restraint in this story. It’s a story that has been set up perfectly, with Jesus spending half the gospel eating with people: tax collectors and Pharisees, wealthy and poor. And now, in the same way that Luke doesn’t tell us the Christmas story until the end of Chapter two, Luke waits until the sun is setting on Easter Day before telling us the story of Jesus’ resurrection appearance.

We shouldn’t be surprised that Jesus shows up at dinnertime. Here’s what I wonder about, though: The disciples are not watching for Jesus’ resurrection appearance. They are not expecting it. Yes, they are wondering what all these events might have meant. They are taking
each event in sequence, again and again, trying to understand it. But they are certainly not watching for Jesus’ resurrection appearance.

It is not until Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them that they recognize him. They are not paying attention (another theme that is at play throughout the gospel of Luke), and it is only at the table that their eyes are opened.

This story is about as difficult to catch as a snowflake or a child-like soap bubble. It points to the physical reality of Jesus’ presence with the disciples, and yet as quickly as the story settles, Jesus, what? Disappears from their sight; just like a snowflake or soap bubble as it hits the palm of your hand. In the same way that mist is neither quite rain nor quite air, and dreams are neither quite waking nor quite sleeping, Jesus is neither quite with us nor not with us.

This is a story that points us to Jesus being at once with us and with God; to Christ being both human and divine. It points to the threshold, the doorway, the liminal place between physical presence and spiritual presence that remains at the center of our faith.

It is a perfect story for Confirmation Sunday. On the one hand, our confirmands are on the threshold, standing in a doorway, so to speak. Not quite dependent and not quite independent, not quite child and not quite adult, straddling the doorway between. On the other hand, this very mystery, of Jesus being at once human and divine, at once present and distant is the very thing that is so difficult in confirmation. I’ve heard it again and again, if only I had some proof of God, some evidence, some physical tangible data to show God’s existence, then I could really know what I believe.

But, faith isn’t like that, is it? Proven? Well, yes, the gospel writer, Luke, does set out to give an orderly account based on years of research. But, Luke’s story is nonetheless a mingling
of history and personal narrative, woven together by poetry and ancient scripture, embellished miracles and mystical dining room encounters late on Easter Sunday.

To me, this story is a reminder that we come to church, not necessarily because we are paying attention to God in our midst, but because we need to be in a community of people who also rehearse the story of our faith. We need to tell and retell and re-imagine and wonder again at this story of Jesus, with us and with God, at once human and divine. Church is a place where we stand at the threshold of God’s story, and allow our lives to be reflected in the narrative of life and death, empty tomb and Emmaus meal.

We come, not to “prove” that God showed up on that road to Emmaus, but to wonder how we might be like those disciples, how we might recognize or not recognize Jesus at our own tables; how Jesus might be standing in our midst, walking alongside us, asking us what we are talking about, what we are worried about, what we are frightened of.

In the end, the disciples, after encountering Jesus, didn’t go back to their ordinary lives; they ran back to tell their friends, and ultimately to live differently in response. In that way, the feast on the road to Emmaus was not a graduation feast. Yes, the feast happens at the end of the story; it is an ending of sorts. The disciples are beginning to understand that their relationship with Jesus will be different than it was before.

But, at a graduation feast, you say goodbye to the people and place where you studied and learned and lived. Maybe you enter the doors of your high school or college again, but only rarely. And certainly, if you are a parent at a graduation feast, you are proud of your child, you are relieved that it is over, you are looking to the next thing on the agenda. Allow today’s feast — your lunch, your dinner, your donuts or Culbertson room cookies and cake — to be an
Emmaus feast, one where you might be caught unawares by Jesus breaking bread in your midst.

Amen.
Unfortunately, there is not a stone in our cloister walk for the town of Ephesus, where the book of Ephesians was sent, but maybe there should be. The book of Ephesians is one of the older letters from the New Testament, written with an emphasis on Christian unity — an important founding principal of Kenilworth Union Church.

Christian unity became critical this year as we traveled to Guatemala on our mission trip, where youth from Kenilworth Union, a non-denominational Protestant church, partnered with an American missionary team from the Evangelical tradition and a Guatemalan missionary team from a Pentecostal church in Sumpango, Guatemala. Then, because Betty, the Pentecostal Guatemalan missionary, teaches English at a Catholic orphanage set up specifically to care for children living with HIV, we were also partnered with Catholic nuns.

It was global Christianity at its best. For our youth, it was a tangible introduction to Christian diversity, and despite our different ways of talking about and encountering God, it highlighted how God still yet calls us to a common mission to love those who God loves. Regardless of time or place, race or mother tongue, we are all adopted into God’s family.

This particular text from the book of Ephesians comes from the introduction. It is the longest sentence in the Bible. All eleven verses comprise one long sentence in Greek, with 206
words in total. Thankfully, it is quite short compared to the 44 hundred word sentence from James Joyce’s novel Ulysses, and thankfully, in English today’s text is divided into 6 sentences, but it remains quite complex. So, let us encounter God as we hear this reading from scripture.

Ephesians 1:3-14

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“Houston, we have a problem,” said astronaut Jim Lovel, after an oxygen tank exploded on the 1970 spacecraft Apollo 13. As the near-disaster unfolded, astronauts on their way to the moon, and NASA scientists on the ground, had to quickly abandon their lunar landing in favor of survival. In light of the explosion, the three man crew relocated to the smaller but undamaged Lunar Module, the vehicle that would have landed them on the moon, only to discover that they had yet another problem. Carbon dioxide.

The CO2 filter on the Lunar Module was only meant for two men for a day and a half, not three people for four days. The air quickly became un-breathable. You remember how the story goes. There were extra CO2 filters on the Command Module. But they take square filters. The filters on the Lunar Module, where the astronauts needed them, were round.

Here, in the film adaptation of the story, the drama builds as the air becomes more and more dense with carbon dioxide and the music swells. Gene Kranz, the NASA flight director finally says, “Well, I suggest you, gentlemen, invent a way to put a square peg in a round hole. Rapidly.” It’s a great scene, beautifully written. Go back and watch it if you have the chance.

Because, that’s just what they do. They build a contraption that fits a square peg in a round hole. With duct tape, plastic bags, and the arm of a spacesuit. “The Mailbox” is what the
astronauts ended up calling it — that square peg that fit in the round hole. And it saved their lives.

I say all this, not just because it was my favorite film for so many years, but also because I’m right in the middle of curriculum season — the time of year when I get to read and study in preparation for teaching in the Fall — and I have to say that teaching God’s story to young people is awfully similar to fitting a square peg in a round hole while floating precariously in outer space — it makes you wish you had more duct tape.

First, there is this creation story that is foreign to our scientific-minded public school students. Then there is this improbably great flood that destroys the people and animals except the ones on Noah’s Ark — a flood that is terrible, yes, but great. Then, there is this laughable promise from God, even Abraham and Sarah laugh when they hear it. A son born to an old barren couple? Land given to wandering sojourners? Descendants that number the stars? Is this story a joke? Then, after blessings and sorrows unfold in equal number for Abraham and Sarah’s descendants, there is this crazy unbelievable river crossing — just in the nick of time, as Pharaoh’s army approaches, Moses leads his people out of slavery through the Red Sea, and the waters close behind them just in time for Pharaoh’s army — horse and rider — to be thrown into the sea. But it doesn’t stop there. In fact, those early stories seem to be preparing us for what comes next.

- A child wrapped in swaddling clothes.
- Wise men from the Far East traveling by starlight to bring frankincense.
- Shepherds startled by angels bringing good news of great joy.
- A wise man walking on water, multiplying loaves and fishes, healing those who touch even just the hem of his robe.
How are we to see ourselves in this wild story, without seeing it first hand? And, it doesn’t stop there, of course.

- Transfigured?
- Resurrected?
- Ascended?

This story of ours is odd and mysterious and beyond. It doesn’t take much to realize that it isn’t just teenagers, but all of us, who are students of the world around us; part critical-thinker, part analytical deconstructionist, part cynic. Curmudgeon as we call it in the Lancaster family, that surly, disbelieving part of ourselves that dismisses miracles or over thinks the gospel.

Sometimes, fitting ourselves into this story is like fitting a round peg in a square hole. The culture is different. The language is different. The landscape is different. There are questions and surprises at every turn. Somehow, this book, the Bible, isn’t quite the easy-to-read owner’s manual or instruction guide we thought it might be. There aren’t easy answers to global problems hidden inside it, and it encourages us to step out in hope or faith or courage again and again.

One person put it this way, after reading scripture, “I think part of what it means for God to be ‘revealed’ is to keep us guessing, to come to terms with the idea that knowing God is also a form of not knowing God, of knowing that we cannot fully know, but only catch God in part — which is more than enough to keep us busy.” ¹⁵⁶

Maybe that is how this unbearably long sentence in Ephesians unfolds some truth to us. This Trinitarian blessing at the beginning of Ephesians, this blessing about God, comes to us not because we can fully understand it, but because it invites us again into the knowledge and mystery of God. It invites us into a new way of understanding ourselves and each other in relationship to this bigger story of God-with-us. This text is a reorientation, telling us that we are
adopted as Children of God. Verse 5 reads, “Just as God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before God in love, God destined us for adoption as Children of God through Jesus Christ.”

We are adopted into this long story, a story that begins before the foundation of the world. Yes, this story feels foreign to us sometimes; but because we are adopted into it, we are welcome to grapple with the foreignness of it — knowing that no matter what, we still belong in it. It is a story that becomes our story. It becomes our story at our baptism, or maybe even before that. It becomes our story again and again every time we encounter it. All of us are foreigners, outsiders, even those who seem to be the most insider of insiders is a foreigner to this story, and yet all of us are adopted into it, adopted into God’s family, loved, beloved, forgiven and marked by the Holy Spirit as legal recipients of God’s good inheritance.

It is in this way that — no matter who we are, or where we are on life’s journey — we do fit. Even if we are a square peg in a round hole, God adopts us, weaving us into this holy family. God has enough duct tape and bits of spacesuits handy to incorporate us into this story, and then some. Being duct taped into this story is what makes it so radical — an inclusive story of God’s love for us — and it is also what makes it such a difficult story. This adoption is not just for us, for this group or that group, but for all, for the sake of God’s great love. A 5th century theologian put it this way: adoption is “the work of a really transcendent love.” It is a call to love those who God loves, not just because God suggests we should, but because now, we are all family.

Sometimes we love those who God loves for just a few hours. For example, I remember my first flight across the country — all by myself when I was 14. The woman I sat next to on the plane took me under her wing, talked me through the whole flight, helped me navigate my layover and sat with me as we ate lunch. She was a Christian, I even still remember some of the
theological concepts we discussed. But, more than that, I can still feel the sense that she saw me as part of her family. She reached out to love who God loves, not for her sake, but because God’s love for her caused her to care for someone else.

Other times, we love those who God loves for just a few days. For example, the Wednesday of our Mission Trip this year, Wednesday June 17, was Father’s Day in Guatemala. I wouldn’t have known, except that our site coordinator told me that it might be a tender day for our host missionary Nina, who lost her father suddenly that fall. So, as I entered the orphanage where my team was working, I was thinking not only of Betty, but of the children I would be working with that day. The gravity of spending Father’s Day with dozens of orphans was not lost on us, dearly loved by each nun, but abandoned by so many others for so many reasons.

But it wasn’t until the end of the day that Father’s Day really began to take on meaning. I’m not sure if he called out “Mr. Steve” or “Mr. Williams” or if we just heard his little feet pounding the pavement, but Roberto got our attention just as we were leaving for the day with a gift for Steve Williams.

Roberto is a 7 or 8-year-old orphan who had been living there since before he could remember. Steve Williams (with the help of one of our graduates) had the opportunity to teach English several days in a row to Roberto’s class, and in that time, Roberto learned that Steve was a father. The nuns said that Roberto had never really connected to anyone like this before, and so it was a surprise to them to see him so lit up about English and about getting to know someone.

In those short few days, Roberto saw that Steve was part of his family, part of this wider family, both of them fully adopted into God’s transcendent love. The gift Roberto gave Steve was a small box; on one side, there were a few drawings, on the other side, it said, in Spanish, Happy Father’s Day, love Roberto.
And finally, sometimes, we get to love those who God loves from the very beginning, and they help us to see and know God. For example, one family, in preparing their four-year-old son for the homecoming of a new baby, told him that this child would be a blessing from God. After the baby arrived, a friend was over visiting the family and noticed the four-year-old leave the room. The child went into the room where his new baby sister was sleeping and was heard saying to her, “Now, can you tell me what God looks like?”

No matter how old we are, God can speak in and through us. God names us and claims us as Children of God, adopted into God’s wild story of transcendent love. May we know this love, through one another, and through this sacred story that we can call our own. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.
Sermon
ACTS 10
“I Really am learning”
August 16, 2015

Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”
—Acts 10:34–35

In the month of August, Jo Forrest and myself have the privilege of preaching on the Acts of the Apostles, a sermon series we have entitled Ancient Modern Family. Akin to the TV series Modern Family, the book of Acts is comprised of eccentrics and misfits—each new person added to the family necessitating adjustments and precipitating arguments. Would Modern Family characters Phil, Claire, Jay, Gloria, Mitchell and Cameron be as confuddled as Stephen, Peter and Paul by God’s vision of welcome? I am guessing they would have struggled just as much with the growing eccentricities of the early Church family.

The people in the book of Acts are diverse ethnically, culturally and geographically. Their stories are knit together by the repetition of our common family story: that of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, told again and again in new ways adapted to each situation that arises. The book of Acts is a continuation of the gospel of Luke, written by the same anonymous author, to the same named but unknown Theophilus, a name which can be translated as God Lover.

The book of Acts is an unparalleled and unprecedented history of the early Church. It is rooted by political, geographical, and historical details, but it is not told for the sake of historical
accuracy, instead illuminating a wider theological vision: that the story of our God is not just
God of some, but God of all.

Last week, Jo Forrest ended her sermon with the stoning of Stephen. After Stephen’s
death, the apostles became scattered like dust on the wind, going out from Jerusalem in every
direction. And that is why, in today’s text, Peter is summoned, not from Jerusalem, but from the
coastal city of Joppa to visit the seaport of Caesarea to preach to Cornelius, a Gentile God-
worshiper and leader in the Roman military. Let us listen now, for God to speak to us and among
us as we hear today’s text from the book of Acts.

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It is not difficult to imagine today’s story. Visions and dreams might seem farfetched, but
honestly, I can relate. Maybe Peter is waiting for lunch, possibly a little hungrier than he thought,
and slips into a spiritual dream-like state, picturing food coming down to him from heaven. I get
hungry. I can imagine the scene. It all makes sense. But, can you imagine
acting
on
such visions?
Saying “yes” to the disruption of these strangers who arrive at his door?

Having just returned from our Wilderness Confirmation trip, which you have just heard a
bit about, it will not surprise you that my own connection to today’s story is influenced by our
travels. Wendell Berry describes it well: Scripture is best read and understood outdoors, and the
farther outdoors the better. Outdoors we are confronted everywhere by wonders; we see that the
miraculous is not extraordinary, but the common mode of existence. Standing beneath the stars,
pondering our smallness in light of the depth of the universe, one can hardly dismiss the miracles
of scripture: even Jesus turning water into wine seems unsurprising. As Wendell Berry says,
without the wilderness, we forget the greater and still continuing miracles by which water—with
soil and sunlight—is turned into grapes. And so, the wilderness shapes my reading of these visions and dreams, by way of three wilderness practices.

First, leaving our watches behind, we practiced timelessness. We accepted, as wilderness philosopher Sigurd Olsen calls it, the time clock of the wilderness: each day governed by daylight and dark rather than schedules and alarms, eating if hungry and sleeping when tired, becoming completely immersed in the ancient rhythms of life.

Second, we allowed silence and scripture to echo off the morning sunrise. After breakfast, with all our gear packed up in our boats, we read scripture floating in our canoes and paddled away in a wordless silent prayer.

And finally, we practiced the mantra know-as-you-go. I am guessing that my wilderness team is cringing at the thought of know-as-you-go. It became so deeply important to our experience that we may have overused the phrase. But it was necessary. Here’s why: Out on a lake in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in Minnesota, navigational landmarks like islands, peninsulas and bays are shown quite clearly on a map but run together in real life—appearing indistinguishable.

This flusters campers—old and young alike. “We’re going the wrong way” you want to say out loud. “There’s supposed to be a bay up here on our left, but it’s just a wall of trees.” But then, when it seemed like turning back was the only option, as if by magic, the bay would open up before us, and we could paddle right through, continuing our route, exactly as the map predicted.

You see, we took no GPS. There was no little blue dot, indicating on the map our exact location. The paper map was our only guide. And, when more questions arise, like “where will we camp tonight?” or “when will we get there?” we only knew as much as we know at the
moment. We could not ask google. We could not call ahead to make a reservation at the next lake over. We could only paddle forward, seeing if there was a campsite vacant. If not, our only choice was to paddle onward, toward the next lake.

And so, a wilderness guide explains: to avoid the anxiety that accompanies the feeling of lost-ness, and to truly dwell in the timelessness of the wilderness, we adopt this mantra: know-as-you-go. Know-as-you-go means understanding what you know now is enough. It means living contentedly with the uncertainty of what lies ahead. It is knowing that the future will unfold into the present, and God will be there, just as God is here.¹⁶³

These three practices: timelessness, silence and know-as-you-go allowed us to be completely in the moment, concerned only about the task at hand, uninterrupted by tweets or texts or alerts. These practices were binding, creating a deep spiritual trust—a divine trust in the mystery of mysteries.

And these practices, I would suggest, bear witness, not only to experiences in the wilderness, but to today’s text as well—to Peter’s faithfulness as he encounters Cornelius. For one, Peter might not have been able to drop everything and go with complete strangers if he did not, in part, practice a spirituality of timelessness. Yes, this is Peter who we know from the Gospels; Peter, the fisherman. Peter, one of the twelve; and, to be honest, he was one of the disciples closest to Jesus—present both at Jesus’ transfiguration and Jesus’ night in the garden of Gethsemane. And, yes, this is Peter, the one who denied Jesus three times; Peter who wept uncontrollably as the rooster crowed, realizing how hopelessly heartfelt his denials of Jesus had been.

But at some point, Peter is given a chance to turn; to turn from denial to faith, from despair to hope, from deserting Christ to shepherding his flock.¹⁶⁴ And so, in today’s text, Peter
is no longer in denial, but now a revered faithful leader. Peter hears God tell him: Go. Do not ask questions. And so, despite all natural inclination to the contrary, practicing a sense of timelessness, wrapped up, truly, in God’s time, not his own—Peter goes.

And, once he goes, we see a second openness: Peter rooted in this know-as-you-go spirituality. Peter asks Cornelius, “Why have you sent for me?” And, once Peter hears how God knit their lives together with these dual visions—Peter replies: I really am learning that God does not show partiality to one group over another. I love this line for two reasons: On the one hand, Peter sees that God shows no partiality. God’s love is not just for some exclusive group, not just for those who were brought up in this way or that way, not just for those who were part of this story from the beginning. Instead, God is breaking down the barriers between insider and outsider, between us and them. God’s transformative love is not just for one but for all.

On the other hand, Peter sees this love, this wide, deep love of God for all people—and he says “I really am learning…” this. He sees that God’s love is so expansive that it is only day-by-day that we can learn how deep and wide God’s love truly is. Peter has become rooted in this know-as-you-go theology: that God’s love can be revealed wider and deeper even now, even today.

Today, like Peter and Cornelius, we are united by two visions: In one vision, we have a vision for a child—the child baptized here today. In this vision, we imagine a world where this Church supports Joseph’s parents, supports Joseph’s godparents, and supports Joseph as he grows in faith. This does not mean there will not be struggles. This does not mean that the road ahead will be straight. There will days when know-as-you-go is all that we will know. And yet, in our vision, God is with us—no matter what.
Secondly, we have a vision for these wilderness confirmation participants—children once baptized here or there, then or maybe even not yet. And now, some of these baptismal promises have been realized, this Church has wrapped its arms around them, this Church has nurtured them and is nurturing them and these youth can live into new baptismal promises, promises to guide and nurture Joseph—to give voice to God’s love in this world that they know.

The Church’s love for these youth is rooted in a sense of timelessness, trusting God’s timing, not our own. This does not mean there will not be struggles. This does not mean that the road ahead will be straight. There will days when know-as-you-go is all that we will know. And now, as we are all sent out from worship into our everyday lives, we are asked to ponder Peter and Cornelius’ story anew. What new vision might grow among us? Peter says, I really am learning that God does not show partiality to one group over another. How is this true now, in our own lives, in our own contexts? How is God’s surprising welcoming love changing us, now? How is God calling us to live, in light of Peter’s insight into God’s love? Let us prayerfully gather in silence, welcoming God to open our eyes, as we wait upon the Lord. Amen.
One of them, a women named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth, from the city of Thyatira, a worshiper of God, listened, and the Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what Paul was saying.
—Acts 16:15

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The book of Acts is a geographer’s dream come true, or a nightmare for someone directionally challenged. In today’s story, though, geography matters, so let us begin to make peace with it. First, geography reminds us that scripture takes place someplace instead of no place. The story of our God is an embodied story, rooted in a particular place with a particular people. This means that our faith does not come out of nowhere—like a mysterious unmarked package sent through the mail. USPS can find a tracking number for the package that is our faith—it has a place, a context, and a history. Christianity has multiple contexts, in fact, which allow us to see God.

Our own spiritual geography fine-tunes this point. As we go from place to place, meeting people from different hometowns and experiences, we can see how both our own faith as well as God’s guiding story found in scripture is not ‘set in stone’ but instead is a ‘living faith,’ shifting and changing as people encounter our dynamic God year after year.
Second, geography reminds us that the book of Acts is a travel narrative. Just like lobsters should come with a complimentary bib, the book of Acts should come with a complimentary map. The book of Acts is a travel narrative, not for geographical reasons, but for theological ones. The book of Acts begins where Luke left off—with Jesus’ final message to the disciples: be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

This would be a very disappointing story, I’m guessing, if the disciples just went around Jerusalem for a bit, and then tucked in for a long winter’s nap. If the disciples didn’t go into the Air Force’s wild blue yonder or Buzz Light Year’s infinity and beyond, then the author of Luke-Acts would have very little to report. But, as luck would have it—luck, or faith, or wisdom, or holy urging—Jesus’ disciples did go. They gave witness to this wild story of forgiveness and freedom, life beyond life, new life springing forth from within the limits of our very mortal lives. They go, and they go, and they go to the very ends of the earth. And, so we need a map. Phrygia and Bithynia are just as vague to us as Pontus and Pamphilia at this point.

We might understand a bit better if the geography were a little closer to our own: We might understand if, having been prevented from going up to the East Coast, Paul traveled west from New York City toward Pennsylvania and through Ohio. We might understand if, being prevented from going south through Indiana, Paul took the northern route through Detroit and headed east toward Holland, Michigan. We might understand if, while in Holland, Michigan, Paul had a dream about a man from Chicago saying, “Come, help us.” And we might understand if, the next morning Paul boarded a boat in Holland and sailed past Gary, Indiana toward Chicago. We might understand if, passing by the towering cityscape that is downtown Chicago, Paul docked his boat at Wilmette Harbor. And we might understand if, on a Sunday morning, instead of heading south toward Chicago’s city center, Paul instead walked north, on Sheridan
Road, seeking a place of prayer. We might understand, we might not even be surprised, if Paul found a gathering of women that morning in our quaint chapel, worshiping God together. And we might understand if, there (or here, rather), Paul came across a businesswoman, Lydia, a seller of royal purple cloth and a worshiper of God. And we might understand if, after all that, God opened the heart of that businesswoman, Lydia, who subsequently was baptized along with everyone from her household, and invited Paul and the disciples over for post-church lunch.

Then, we might understand.

But, that’s not the way the story goes, is it? Instead, Paul is on his way through Phrygia and Galatia—smack dab in the middle of modern day Turkey—and he tries to go west. He heads toward Asia—not Asia as we know it: China or Japan or India—but what the Greek-speaking world would call Asia: coastal towns like Mysia and Troas and Lydia along the coast of Turkey. Paul tries to go west, but the Holy Spirit does not let him. So, Paul tries the opposite direction. He heads northwest toward Bithynia—a gorgeous forested mountain region along the Black Sea. But he is blocked again; the Spirit of Jesus will not let them go. They can’t go west; they can’t go east. They can’t go left; they can’t go right. They can’t go up toward one coast, and they can’t go down toward the other. It reads like a cartoon, Elmer Fud or Bugs Bunny trying to go, but being prevented by roadblocks at every turn.

God says “no” to the east, and “no” to the west. What will it take for God to say “yes”? And, for that matter, is there some poetry to God’s “no”? We know times in our own lives when God has not let us go left or right, but only straight on to adventures beyond imagining. “No” is sometimes a place of hope, but more often, it feels frustrating and lonely. Geographically, “no” is no man’s land, a lost wilderness wasteland with no way out. I’ve been there. You’ve been there. “No” means waiting. “No” means wondering what’s next. “No” means a break from the
routine of going-going-going-going-going, and a painfully extended pause, in which the answer becomes wait-wait-wait-wait-wait. And, “no” is never a peaceful waiting, but an agonizing waiting.

Paul could not go north or south, east or west; the only way left is out—out onto the sea in a sailboat, out into the unknown, out. And so, Paul heads up to the port city of Troas, where at least he might be able to board a boat and head in God-knows-what direction. Troas, adjacent to and mostly synonymous with the ancient city of Troy, where Homer’s Illiad takes place, has a reputation for being a place where adventures begin—akin to Bilbo and Frodo starting at the Shire, Harry Potter and Ron Weasley starting at Platform 9¾ or Anakin and Luke Skywalker starting at Tatooine.

And so, Paul’s adventure begins. And it begins with a dream. A Macedonian man is crying out to Paul, “help us.” And so, waking up the next morning, Paul seems to know what should happen next: he and the others will go to Macedonia. Seeing Macedonia on our map, we can sigh with relief. Knowing the geography, we are not too surprised that Paul is having visions of Macedonia. It would be like having visions of Chicago while being docked in Holland, Michigan. In part, it is the obvious choice. And, maybe this can give us a little hope when we hear “no” as our answer. Sometimes there is an obvious answer to the question of, “if not this, then what?”

I mean, Paul could turn back completely. Or, maybe he could sail off into the far reaches of the Mediterranean Sea, going where no man has gone before. But, if you are in Troas, why skip by the Macedonians. Looking back at the geography from Acts chapter two, no one was from Macedonia on the day of Pentecost. Maybe no one has yet heard the story Paul has to tell.
Why not go there first, before going to the far reaches—the “uttermost parts of the earth” as the King James Bible says? And so they go.

They stop over for the night at Samothrace, which I mention only because it sounds like an amazing place we should all visit—an unforgettable volcanic island in the middle of Mediterranean Sea with a mile high mountain jutting out toward the sky. Then, the next morning, they set sail for Neapolis, dock their boat, and head out on foot toward Philippi, the very easternmost city that is still officially within the District of Macedonia. And, so it goes, they arrive. God, having said “no” to every other direction of travel finally says “yes” to Macedonia. And it is here, in God’s “yes” that our story really begins. Having been called to Macedonia, I love the fact that their first story is of Paul and the disciples heading outside the walls of the Macedonian city of Philippi to find a place of prayer.

Have you ever had this kind of experience? When you have been told “no” several times, and finally, when that “yes” comes, even that “yes” makes you shy and hesitant, makes you tip-toe away just a bit, maybe to find a place of prayer, but maybe just to have a private little freak out before you are willing to trust this new “yes.” Sometimes, we need to walk away for a moment of prayer before we can roll up our sleeves, get down to business, and head in the direction toward which we have been called. And yet, seeing the truth of Paul’s story, it is while Paul is walking in the opposite direction of the Macedonian city that God’s “no” becomes a “yes” right before his eyes. God’s “yes” is no longer just a vision of a nondescript Macedonian man crying for help, God’s “yes” is now embodied in the person of Lydia who is, in every way, not who we might expect.

Lydia is, in God’s confuddling way, not a Macedonian, and most certainly not a Macedonian man. She is already a person of faith. She is seemingly in no need of help. She is
independent and wealthy, in charge of her own household. She is prayerful and even open to
God’s change of heart. Lydia is a seller of purple cloth—the reason we invited you to wear
purple along with us today—and from the purple-cloth-making region of the ancient near east—a
town called Thyatira in the district of Lydia, her namesake. Lydia is from Lydia, back in the
opposite direction, back in the area called Asia where Paul was originally trying to go. By saying
no to Lydia’s hometown, God was saying yes to Lydia. God’s “yes” and God’s “no” meet in her
very presence. And, in the same way, God’s “yes” and God’s “no” meet in the very purple cloth
that she sells.

On the one hand, Lydia would have known that purple was reserved for royalty. And
selling purple cloth was serious business. Julius Caesar, for example, prohibited anyone but
royalty from wearing purple and later, much after Lydia’s time, King Nero prohibited anyone
from even selling purple, it was so valuable. Purple was a high luxury, a visible symbol of
wealth—more luxurious that even the most luxurious car, or watch, or technological gadget. It
was made from the shell of a hard-to-procure Mediterranean sea-snail, and according to the
folklore surrounding ancient purple dye, it took more than twelve-thousand sea-snails to extract
barely enough dye to color one royal purple toga.

Lydia would have been a wealthy businesswoman, unique in and of itself in her day—a
woman of such wealth and class that she did not need to be accompanied by a man—and, she
would have been accustomed to dealing with the richest of the rich and powerful—the kings and
queens of the kingdom of Rome. And yet, being that close to power and wealth did not puff up
her pride. Lydia was a woman of faith, even before Paul met her.

On the Sabbath day, there she was, at the riverside, at a humble place of prayer, not some
city-center house of worship, but at the side of the river among other women of faith, praising
God. Yet, here’s the rub. Here’s the other thing that Lydia would have known about purple cloth. Purple is not just a symbol of wealth and royalty. Yes, we use purple cloth at Kenilworth Union Church during the season of Advent—a season signaling that we are awaiting Christmas, that we are awaiting our King of Kings to be born in that humble manger. But, alternatively, we hang our purple cloth during the season of Lent, a season of repentance that prepares us for the journey that Jesus takes into Jerusalem toward his death. Purple is also a color of mourning and sorrow.

Lydia’s purple cloth gives us a glimpse of the dual realities of God’s “yes” and God’s “no”—the royal dignity and promise of purple held up alongside the melancholy of purple as a color of sorrow. When the answer to our hoped for future is “no” we experience loss. What we hoped for cannot be. We grieve. Often in “no” we experience true, deep heartbreak. The misery of “no” can be long-lasting. But, when we hear “no,” what is the other vision God has for us? Is there not a new ‘someplace’ to which we might go? Is there not a new future for us, too, a future with dignity and hope into which God calls us? In Lydia, with her purple cloth and her open heart, we catch a glimpse of God—the One who holds us in the joy and the sorrow, in the purple grief of “no” and the royal celebration of “yes.”

Yet, it is often only in looking back at the journey, retracing our steps, reexamining the geography of our lives, that we can see the promises of God at work with us and in us, beside us and beyond us. May God make our geography holy so that we might see God’s promises unfold in our midst. And, may we live like Lydia and like Paul, with riverbank faith.
He [Apollos] began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the Way [of God] more accurately.

—Acts 18:26

I love summer. I wish there were some groundhogs day equivalent for summer, with some designated rodent offering us another five weeks or so of summer if he sees his shadow. But, Neil deGrasse Tyson was right when he tweeted yesterday that 2015 had the earliest possible Memorial Day and the latest possible Labor Day, granting us the longest possible “unofficial” summer.¹⁶⁵ Maybe we have had more than our fair share? Maybe I can capitulate to the demands of fall, the colder weather, and the turn toward winter if I begin to welcome in the changing colors, the sweaters, and the pumpkin-flavored everything?

The end of summer also brings the end of this summer sermon series on the Acts of the Apostles. Jo Forrest and myself have taken you through almost all of the book of Acts through sermons and study, and I have found this story to be not-so-foreign and not-so-far-fetched and not-so-out-of-the-ordinary compared to our own modern lives. The characters make up an Ancient Modern Family, drawn together by some power beyond and within. They experience the unifying and demanding tug of what we call the Holy Spirit, and try to articulate, as best they can, with God’s help, what they experience together. We end today, not quite at the end of the
Among minor characters in scripture, Apollos is pretty far down the list, at least for the New Testament. However, unlike the Ethiopian Eunuch from chapter 8, we do find out his name, so Apollos plays more than just a bit part. And, unlike Lydia or Cornelius, Apollos does show up in another book of the Bible—First Corinthians—so he must not have been insignificant.

What might Apollos offer us about God and God’s promises, and even about ourselves? First, we should not be surprised that Apollos is an eloquent speaker stirred up by the Spirit. He is from Alexandria. Alexandria, Egypt, just west of Cairo. People in Apollos’ day would have known of Alexandria. In fact, in the same way that we might make assumptions about the business acumen of Kellogg graduates, the audience hearing about Apollos in the first or second century would have made their own assumptions about Apollos’ rhetorical skills because he was from Alexandria—a place celebrated for its school of rhetoric.

Alexandria was a place to behold, a cultural center. Philo was from Alexandria—the most famous of famous Hellenistic Jewish philosophers. The Septuagint, our very first Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, was translated there in Alexandria. And, while the Jewish population in Egypt has been shrinking tremendously since the 1950s and was reported to be as low as only 12 people as of 2014, in all of Egypt—at the time of Apollos, Alexandria would have been a hub for Hellenistic Judaism. The Septuagint, our very first Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, was translated there in Alexandria. And, while the Jewish population in Egypt has been shrinking tremendously since the 1950s and was reported to be as low as only 12 people as of 2014, in all of Egypt—at the time of Apollos, Alexandria would have been a hub for Hellenistic Judaism.166 We should not be surprised that Apollos, the Alexandrian, was an eloquent speaker stirred up by the Spirit.
Second, we should not be surprised that, even within decades of Jesus’ death and resurrection, there are already multiple groups of people preaching about what God might be doing. Apollos was preaching accurately about Jesus but only knew about John’s baptism. Though, we should not be surprised that, without Twitter to give him the most up to date celebrity gossip, Apollos had not yet heard about or experienced Jesus’ baptism.

Thankfully, when our power couple, Priscilla and Aquila enter the scene, they notice that Apollos has a few gaps in his theology, and instead of entering into debate with him in the synagogue, they wait until the end of the day, and quietly invite him into their home and teach Apollos more accurately about the way of God. We should not be surprised that there were many ways to talk about God.

Third, we should not be surprised that, although Paul and Apollos do not meet there in Ephesus at the time, Paul and Apollos do meet up later. In fact, I would not be surprised if this little story about Apollos in the book of Acts appears there just to help us along when we do read in First Corinthians about the drama that unfolded between Paul and Apollos.

Here is how Paul describes it in First Corinthians (since we have no record of Apollos’ side of the story): “When jealousy and fighting exist between you, aren’t you being unspiritual and living by human standards? When someone says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ and someone else says ‘I belong to Apollos,’ aren’t you acting like people without the Spirit? After all, what is Apollos? And what is Paul? They are servants who helped you to believe. Each one had a role given to them by the Lord. I, Paul, planted, Apollos watered, but God made it grow. Because of this, neither the one who plants, nor the one who waters is anything, but the only One who is anything is God who makes it grow.”167
I love Paul’s take on the situation, his humble brag about how he really got to the Corinthians first, he planted, and Apollos watered. And yet, Paul shows candid humility about how God is the One who makes anything grow. It is a powerful reminder for us, that God is the one from whom all blessings flow.

All of this—given Apollos’ short story—give us a larger picture than we might expect. The eloquence of Apollos, paired with his identity as a bit of a theological misfit in Ephesus, the mentoring from Priscilla and Aquila paired with the theological infighting that went on later—all point to how real, how authentic, how true to life our Christian ancestors were.

Maybe we should not be surprised when our diverse understandings of God divide us before we can remember that our God is bigger than any of the ways we talk about God—that our God is, beginning and end, one of forgiveness and radical transformation, turning us toward good, when it might be in our nature to do otherwise. We seek unity, and yet we cannot help but turn away from one another.

We came across a synopsis of the Bible this week, a cliff notes version of scripture so to speak, that highlights just that: the way that God calls us to do good, even when it is in our nature to do otherwise. It goes like this:

GENESIS
God: All right you two, don’t do the one thing. Other than that, have fun.
Adam & Eve: Okay.
Satan: You should do the thing.
Adam & Eve: Okay.
God: What happened!??
Adam & Eve: We did the thing.

God: Guys

THE REST OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

God: You are my people, and you should not do the things.

People: We won’t do the things.

God: Good.

People: We did the things.

God: Guys

THE GOSPELS

Jesus: I am the Son of God, and even though you have done the things, the Father and I still love you and want you to live. Don’t do the things anymore.

Healed people: Okay! Thank you!

Other people: We’ve never seen Jesus do the things, but he probably does the things, too.

Jesus: I have never done the things.

Other people: We’re going to put you on trial for doing the things.

Pilate: Did you do the things?

Jesus: No.

Pilate: He didn’t do the things.

Other people: Kill him anyway.

Pilate: Okay.

Jesus: Guys
PAUL’S LETTERS

People: We did the things.

Paul: Jesus still loves you, and because you love Jesus, you have to stop doing the things.

People: Okay.

PAUL’S LETTERS PART II

People: We did the things again.

Paul: Guys

REVELATION

John: When Jesus comes back, there will be no more people who do the things. In the meantime, stop doing the things.

The end.168

But that is the hard part, isn’t it? Figuring out how to stop “doing the things,” figuring out how to live, how to develop an ethic, how to make decisions based on how we know and experience God. Many of us come to Church for just that reason, to learn and develop a moral and ethical code, and to help our children do the same. How should we live, in response to God’s greater love for us?
On Friday, after the image of a Syrian toddler on a Turkish beach caught the world’s attention, a reporter from the BBC interviewed a Syrian schoolteacher who was stuck in Hungary. A mother of three, she fled Homs four years ago and has been on the road ever since. She fled the war in Homs and went south to Damascus, and then west to Lebanon, then north to Turkey and across the Mediterranean on a rubber boat toward Greece.

In Homs, the war was constant. In Lebanon, it was not good for Syrians. In Turkey, there were no jobs, high rent, and a language barrier. Everyone there hated Syrians, she said. On the boat to Greece, this little flooded rubber boat, they lost everything. In Serbia, there was tear gas, and in Hungary, as of Friday, she was trapped in Hungary, forced to stay within the borders, unable to continue to Germany. Now, maybe, maybe she was with the thousands who were allowed to carry on, walking or taking a bus through Austria. Maybe she will be one of the 80,000 who will be received in Germany.

Syria is just barely bigger than the state of Illinois, and 220,000 have been killed in the conflict in—four times the population of New Trier Township. Four million Syrians have fled the country seeking safety—that’s more people than we have in all of Chicago. And seven million more are still internally displaced.

Last week, I said that the book of Acts should come with a map, and that is still true. Hearing about this mother’s journey, it was difficult to ignore the parallels between her voyage and the voyage Apollos would have taken to get from Alexandria to Ephesus to Corinth. The journeys would have overlapped. Her sacred map would have matched ours. The geography that saved her
life, also, by way of Paul and Apollos, Lydia and Priscilla and Aquila, birthed the church, and in some way birthed this gathering here today. Her life and ours are intertwined here in Apollos’ story.

How, then, does Apollos impact us? How does his story give voice to our calling, to our ethic, to our way of living? I think the story of Apollos accentuates what we have been seeing in the book of Acts all along: that neither the book of Acts, nor any scripture, in and of itself is a map.

The Bible is not an instruction manual or a treasure map, guiding us to exactly the “right” way of living. Instead, the book of Acts gives us permission to do exactly what early Christians had to do—remain faithful to their tradition, while reinterpreting it for their new circumstances. Scripture does not dictate how people of faith should respond to refugees in Hungary or clerks in Kentucky, gunshot victims at Stroger Hospital or teenagers in crisis at New Trier.

All these ancient stories in scripture of oddballs and outsiders, tourists and migrants tell us not “how to live” but give us permission to live—not in fear, but in hope. And, with hope, we can take courage, and bring God’s tangible good news to the hard places of the world—with a meal, a blanket, a home, a night without gunshots or terror, a future for a child, a sigh of relief for a weary mother. What will we do? How will we respond? The gospel does not tell us how to respond, but it does tell us to respond. And, it is through the kaleidoscope of these stories, that we can see God’s changing and life-changing love, calling us to participate in the tangible good news of the gospel. May it be so. Amen.
If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you. ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.

—John 4:10

Today we move from font to table, from water to food, from thirst to hunger. We begin at the most elemental, the most necessary, the most essential: water. Without it, even our food dries up, crops die, fires spread, reservoirs and streams and wells dry up. Maybe it all seems like an ancient problem—the Dust Bowl of the 30’s, the West African drought in the 70’s, Ethiopia’s drought in the 80’s—but California’s unprecedented drought today spurred on by greenhouse gasses, demands that we change the way we live. Too much water does the same thing in reverse: thunderstorms, tornadoes, tropical cyclones, monsoons, and melting snow trigger powerful floods that uproot crops and contaminate our reservoirs and streams and wells with unsafe water.

Water is essential. It is both truly life-giving and metaphorically rich. Without it, there is no life on Earth, and with it, possibly, there is life on Mars. Can you believe it? Water on Mars? After witnessing that blood red moon eclipsing last Sunday evening through our cloudy Chicago skies, it is both shocking and not to hear Monday that Mars now shows definitive signs of water—albeit briny, says NASA. Shocking, because for so long it has seemed a thing of science
fiction, and not so shocking because of that eclipse: a tangible reminder of how wild and vast our universe can be.

Water flows on the surface of our neighbor, the red planet, and the timing of this watery report couldn’t be better for Ridley Scott’s new film, The Martian, that was released this week. I haven’t seen the film yet, so don’t worry, I won’t give away any spoilers, but I understand that, because of NASA’s close collaboration, it is the most scientifically accurate space travel film ever made. Well done, Mars, well done.

I suspect it will take months, years, maybe even decades for us to work out exactly what water on Mars can mean for us. Maybe this week’s news will prompt a new generation of scientists, leading to increased scientific curiosity and scientific literacy, even among clergy and politicians and fellow citizens. Maybe it will prompt brave pathfinders to take on new levels of exploration in this final frontier. Maybe it will prompt new thinking about who we are as humans—just as Galileo and Newton and Einstein and Darwin did.

This newfound water on Mars will also impact us as God’s people—expanding our image of God, challenging us to look deeper into the mystery beyond mystery of the divine.

Last Sunday, I had driven down to Hyde Park, seeking fewer clouds and a better view. Standing on the shoreline of Lake Michigan, gazing up at the eclipsing moon, I was surrounded by hundreds of others, also looking up, looking out, and looking beyond. Maybe you were there, too, somewhere along the long shoreline. There was an energy to that communal act, watching together, mostly wordless, but certainly not silent—an experience that was sacred in its own way.

That eclipse was the kind of event that simultaneously made me wonder about the future, as well as become deeply curious about the past. Not yet knowing that scientists would announce
their discovery of water on Mars the very next morning, I was there, standing on the shore on Sunday night, wondering how future scientific discovery might again change our thinking about our place in the universe—just as it has so many times before. And, at the same time, I was wondering how ancient people would have viewed this same event—no twitter hashtags to follow, no news report quickly explaining away the moon’s tint and disappearance, no experience of transatlantic flight or video footage of moon landings to color their encounters of the sky.

Our ancient faith family, wandering the desert with Moses, would have certainly experienced the world in a different way than we do now, ancient rhythms feeling different without streetlights, ancient songs sounding different without car stereos. But, unfortunately there are days when Moses is just another desert wanderer among thousands, and in a year when our planet’s Syrian refugees number the millions, it is not difficult to connect the dots between their journey and that of Moses—escaping deadly oppression, wandering in search of a homeland, seeking basic unchanging necessities of water and food and rest.

And so, we begin with water because, as W. H. Auden wrote, “putting first things first: Thousands have lived without love, not one without water.” Yet, somehow, I would say, it is through water that God shows love, it is at the water’s edge that God’s love is made known, and it is through such tangible, life-sustaining realities that God claims us as beloved. In fact, I would say that we are people of liquid faith. Our sacred story entangles us with water and the sacred from the beginning, the divine spirit hovering over the watery chaos as God speaks order into creation. Our first spiritual home, Eden, sits at the meeting place of four rivers flowing from north and south and east and west. Primordial Noah is the first to watch watery chaos return
again, a flood sweeping away all the earth he’s ever known, save for an ark-full of family and creatures two-by-two.

Later, it is a drought and a famine that brings our ancestors to Egypt, in search of food. And so, in Egypt, when the Pharaoh had forgotten his ancestors—Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph—we meet baby Moses, floating down a river in a basket, while his family watches expectantly in hopes of someone scooping him up into safety. As an adult, Moses meets God in the dry, dry desert—a holy voice from burning bush shouting out to him—“Take off your shoes, for this is Holy Ground. I am the God of your ancestors Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, I am your God, I am who I am. Go, lead your people out of Egypt.” Imbued with divinely extraordinary powers, Moses stands with Charlton Hesston arms spread wide, as God parts the Red Sea and the people cross safely out of slavery and into the desert.

We know this story of liquid faith. After an ancient song of celebration—praising God that Pharaoh’s army, horse and rider were thrown into the sea—the people set out into the desert where God provides manna, bread from heaven and turns bitter water sweet. We should not be surprised then, when Moses, seeking water for his equally grumpy and thirsty people, can, with God’s guidance, bring water from the impossible; water from a rock.

We are people of liquid faith; Moses’ water-bearing God doing the impossible again, being made known in Jesus Christ. Our watery faith story picks up in the Gospel of John where we first meet Jesus—our light in the darkness – not first in the manger, but at the river. In John’s gospel, when we first meet Jesus, there are no Magi or Shepherds or Angels, just John the Baptist—the voice crying out in the wilderness—standing at the water’s edge, at the Jordan River, baptizing. In Jesus’ baptism, John is equally surprised that the Holy Spirit hovers there like a dove from heaven.
Immediately after his baptism, our water-story continues. Jesus gathers up his disciples, and this one we call Christ journeys north to a wedding in Galilee where, at his mother’s request, Jesus performs his first miracle—turning water into wine. We are, indeed, people of liquid faith. Back in Jerusalem for the Passover meal, Jesus meets with a wealthy religious leader, Nicodemus, telling him that it is through water and the Spirit that we can see and know and enter God’s kingdom. Not long after that—but just before Jesus has his chance to walk on water—he travels with his disciples through Samaria, where he meets this woman at the well.

Jesus is breeching all social convention by talking to this woman, a Samaritan. Not that we’re surprised—we’ve come to know Jesus as One who lives against the grain. Not only that, he is breeching social convention by even traveling along that road through Samaria. Yes, as the gospel notes, it is the most direct route, but it would have been controversial for him to travel that way, let alone seek water at their well. Like a Sox fan turning up at Wrigley, in Cubs territory looking for a beer, Jesus was in the wrong place at the wrong time, and yet it is just that that makes this story so compelling—it is what makes Jesus’ offer of living water so life-giving and so life-changing.

Jesus takes the most direct route, and does so boldly, while Moses, alternatively, wanders. There is no good historical reason why it would have taken Moses and his people 40 years to cross the desert; even at its widest point, the desert that separates the “flesh pots of Egypt” and the “promise land flowing with milk and honey” is only 200 miles across; a 4 hour car ride, or at most a 20 day hike—double it if you consider the children and great-grandmothers Moses would have been traveling with. Moses’ desert wanderers wonder “Why are we here?”

Jesus’ new friend, the Samaritan woman, is wondering “Why are you talking to me?” Their journeys are unusual. And, yet, there is something comforting in that—it makes our
unusual journeys no less odd, but it makes us fellow sojourners with Christ, wanderers with God’s people. Our journey to Mars, our journey to a cloudless Hyde Park, our journey to Englewood or Evanston or Italy, our boundary crossing trek to Lambeau Field; there, we are offered living water, there God arrives, announcing good, announcing abundance, announcing life.

Today is World Communion Sunday. It is a day when we are invited to “taste and see that God is good.” All across the globe, Christians are together proclaiming that God’s love stretches across the heavens, and is equally written on our hearts. Long ago, those rivers in Eden flowed north and south and east and west, but somewhere along the line, the watery chaos returned, and we were flung to the far corners of the earth. At our common table, we gather again—and as Christ says, they will come from north and south and east and west, to sit at the table in the kingdom of God.

When the Samaritan woman saw Jesus at the well, she told him, “This well is deep and you have brought no bucket.” And I tell you, “today’s meal is abundant, it is full, it is a great feast, and you have brought no plate?” Yet, it is here, at this feast, that we are called to taste and see that God is good, to bear witness to our liquid faith, knowing that God goes with us to the water’s edge and beyond, as we wander, and as we wonder about God’s mystery beyond mystery. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen.
A Water Journey: 202 Miles, Many Rivers  

Presented at the First Wednesday Luncheon, October 2015

I grew up at 10155 Briar Creek Lane. It is exactly 202 miles from there to Kenilworth Union Church. My parents still live there, at 10155 Briar Creek Lane, and so that little corner of God’s kingdom remains an important place to me today. But, what I want to talk to you about is the journey from there to here, how I got here, how I became passionate about doing the work that I do, and how I see you all as partners in that work.

You are the grandparents and great grandparents of the children I work with, and you have grandchildren and great grandchildren spread across every corner of this earth. At the baptismal font, we – you and I, and many others – have promised to teach God’s story to these children, and like them, we adopted into God’s family. When I am working here with children or youth or their parents, I am working with your family, whether biologically or spiritually, and so, as you will see, you are partners in this calling.

To tell you the story of that 202 mile journey from 10155 Briar Creek Lane to 211 Kenilworth Avenue, I will go back to the beginning. And, because I have been working on my Doctor of Ministry project on Baptism, I will tell you my story through that lens, using water as a theme that connects me to you, connects my story to God’s story, connects us to one another across the many communities that bind us together.

We give you thanks, Eternal God,  
for you nourish and sustain all living things  
by the gift of water
I wasn’t born in Indiana, but my parents were. My dad was born in Carroll County, Indiana – just across from Purdue University over what is now interstate 65. My dad grew up on a farm with cows and corn and beans on a little 59 acre farm – land that was originally purchased from the United States government, from Andrew Jackson, by my great-great-great-grandfather Noah Mullen. That little piece of land sits on Rock Creek, which flows into the Wabash River and down to the Ohio.

My mom was born in Crawfordsville, Indiana and grew up at 602 Sugar Tree Lane, named, I would suspect, after Sugar Creek, which was just around the bend. Sugar Creek, too, flows into the Wabash River and down to the Ohio River, water connecting my parents lives even before they knew one another.

They met finally, in college, when my dad was attending Wabash College there in Crawfordsville, and my mom was home from Butler University visiting her family. If I have my story straight, they graduated from college one weekend, and got married the next.

In the beginning of time,  
your Spirit moved over the watery chaos,  
calling forth order and life.

I was born in Midland Michigan in 1982. Sure, you can do the math. I was born the same summer as Hilary Houtchens – someone you might not know, you probably wouldn’t, but to me, she was everything. We grew up together, like sisters. We went on family vacations together. We had baby brothers around the same time. We walked to school together, we went to church together. It’s hard to say what things we didn’t do together. She was the one with whom I endured the chaos of childhood; skinned knees and trick-or-treating, the fearful unknown that is the first day of kindergarten and the strange yet incredible thing that is becoming a big sister. We did those things together, and we did far fewer things apart.
When it was finally time to move, me to Indiana, and her to Boston, our parents arranged it so that we moved on the same day – we packed up our houses and spent the night at a Holiday Inn, and spent the whole night (as I remember it, though I was barely 7), swimming in the swimming pool. Water was my sending, my goodbye, my swan song.

**In the time of Noah,**
*you destroyed evil by the waters of the flood,*
giving righteousness a new beginning.

Moving to Indiana certainly felt like all was destroyed, my roots torn out, my whole life turned upside down. But it was, too, a new beginning. The moving vans showed up to 10155 Briar Creek Lane and began unpacking. On that first day, I was seeking shelter from the Indiana summer in the refreshing chill of the basement, when the doorbell rang. Caroline Hackett was there – someone you might not know, you probably wouldn’t, but to me, she became everything. I didn’t know it at the moment, but later we spend Christmases together, we would travel to England together, she would stand up in my wedding. We would mourn together – first the death of her hamster and then the death of my Schnauzer, and ultimately the death of grandparents and, in some less tangible way the loss of the innocence of childhood. With Caroline, the chaos of moving was reordered like the receding of flood waters; her presence was an olive branch, a sign that this changed world would also be a place for life.

**You led Israel out of slavery,**
*through the waters of the sea,*
*into the freedom of the promised land.*

Even with good friends like Caroline Hackett alongside me, the journey toward adulthood is never as straightforward as it might look. Being a teenager is, in ways, akin to Moses wandering in the desert. I would have never, ever, thought of becoming a pastor. Granted, as a teenager, I became completely immersed in church – a peer mentor for Wednesday night
confirmation, a leader for Sunday night middle school youth group, a teacher for the two year old Sunday school class. I sought out colleges that had religion and theology majors. As a freshman at Hanover College, though, I immediately chickened out and declared a sociology major. But, on my first day as a sophomore, I had theology class at 8 am (no body takes 8 am classes in college, and even if they do, they aren’t awake for them) and, despite not being a morning person, I knew I was in the right place – talking about religion could be an academic discipline? I could take what I had learned in my other classes – philosophy, Greek, literature, history – and apply it to theological studies? Sounds amazing. Sign me up. I think it took less than a week for me to switch majors.

My desert wandering, my journey from childhood to adulthood, was buoyed by Lilly. Eli Lilly and Ruth Lilly, that is. The religion branch of their philanthropic arm had given grants to a whole bunch of colleges, Hanover College included, for “The Theological Exploration of Vocation” – a really boring way to say “Here’s a couple million dollars to spend over the next 5 years helping college students really figure out what they should do with their lives.” With that grant, I was able to serve as an intern at my home church for a summer, where I shadowed pastors as they led weddings and funerals, pastoral care and outreach, mission trips and home visits. I know that grant helped lots of students do lots of things, but sometimes, thinking about that summer, it feels as if that Lilly grant was at Hanover College that year because God knew I’d need some extra encouragement in order to become a pastor.

When I went to McCormick Seminary here in Chicago directly after college. I was with students from all sorts of backgrounds, and on occasion, women in their 50s or 60s who were attending seminary would say to me, “I wish I had done this when I was your age.” And, I would think of the ways that God had nudged me to go to seminary. On paper my journey looks fairly
straight forward – active at church in High School, theology major in college, and then on to seminary – but my study was compelled by a spiritual wandering, a constant thirst for deeper knowledge and a fuller understanding of God. Mystery, at that time, was not enough. I wanted all the spiritual dimensions of the world unpacked, spelled out, written down, told in full.

It might not have been until after I was ordained, after I had spent a year as a Chaplain at Grinnell College, after I moved from Grinnell, Iowa to La Grange, Illinois that I was really able to stop my wandering and wondering and begin settling into the deeper mystery of God – light beyond light, living water, divine presence in life.

*In the waters of Jordan*  
*Jesus was baptized by John*  
*and anointed with your Spirit.*

It wasn’t until I was first invited to baptize a baby - Henry was his name – that I fully began to pay attention to the gift of that sacrament. When I presided at the sacrament of baptism for the first time, I could sense, for the first time, that there was a spiritual beginning – that little ones know God’s presence even before they have words to express it. I knew that, academically, probably, but I had never sensed it. And, presiding at Henry’s baptism, I sensed that God was with him, and that, if I was being honest, Henry, too, knew that God was with him. Maybe it’s not like that with every baby at every baptism, but for me, my calling was deepened in that water and of God’s Holy Spirit showing up.

*By the baptism of his own death and resurrection,*  
*Christ set us free from sin and death,*  
*and opened the way to eternal life.*

Almost two years ago, a mentor and colleague of mine, Carol McDonald, lost her husband in a terrible winter car accident. In the midst of that tragedy Carol was open about her grief on Facebook, and equally open about the ways that her theological identity was rooting her
in her grief. She wrote, about her husband “Precious Child of God, your baptism is now complete. Thanks be to God for this faithful life.” And she posted a poem:

"As it was in the stillness of the morning
so may it be in the silence of the night.
As it was in the hidden vitality of the womb
so may it be at my birth into eternity.
As it was in the beginning, O God,
so in the end may your gift be born
so in the end may your gift of life be born."

For me, her public grieving, her public faithfulness, allowed me to see how baptism was connected, not just to this hope we have for admittedly adorable babies at the beginning of their lives, but the hope we have for each of us, no matter where we are on life’s journey, old or young, naming God’s love that has been with us from the beginning.

**We thank you, O God, for the water of baptism.**

And so, throughout my ministry, I have found water to follow me, to comfort me, to join me in mission and service and community.

- At the Atlantic Ocean, serving with teenagers for a mission trip on Edisto Island, South Carolina, where the church was founded in 1685.

- On the gulf, serving with Grinnell College students just months after Hurricane Ike tore through Texas.

- At the Pacific Ocean in Sumpango Guatemala, serving with our high school students.

  Even the story of God’s love – the story that starts at the beginning of creation, and journeys past Noah and Moses and on to Jesus – that story, I teach because I have met God at the water’s edge, and it is a story worth telling, good news of extravagant love and welcome and strength and courage. The 202 mile journey from my childhood home to here, to Kenilworth Union Church, has been one of great joy, and deep experiences of God in our midst.
I want to say two things. One on rummage sale, the other on monks. Every year, Kenilworth Union Church has a rummage sale. Maybe your mom carted over all the clothes you outgrew for the rummage sale. Maybe you’ve been enlisted into the army needed to sort through all the donations. Maybe you’ve found some treasured item here during rummage, or hope to find furniture for your dorm room this summer.

We do this rummage sale thing every year, but I want to think about a bigger rummage sale. Church historian Phyllis Tickle is known for saying that the church has a rummage sale every 500 years – and she claims we are in the middle of a giant church rummage sale right now. Every 500 years? Now that’s a different kind of rummage sale. What she means is this. Approximately every 500 years, the church has gone through huge change – tremendous change – and during that change, the church has rummaged through its structures and practices. And each time, the church has changed and reemerged different but renewed. Stronger, even.

500 years ago, the reformation spread across Europe and the world, as Protestant churches splintered off from their Catholic roots. 500 years before that the Roman and Byzantine churches parted ways, becoming what we now call the Catholic and Orthodox traditions. About 500 years before that, Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. And 500 years before that, was what scholars call the Great Transition, when Jesus’ followers spoke passionately about God incarnate in Jesus Christ, changing the Greek and Jewish cultures and religions forever.

Yes, there are other important religious events in the history of Christianity, but this rummage sale analogy gives us a place to hang our hat, a way to understand how enduring God’s
story is, and yet how adaptable God’s story can be to our time and place, our situation, our context.

Now, Phyllis Tickle would say, we are in the middle of yet another rummage sale – another chance to assess and sort through what it means to be Christian, and to do so thoughtfully in light of the gifts and challenges of the 21st century: technology & terrorism, advances in medical technology and changes in the economic landscape. All of this and more. Uggg… a history lesson? What does all this have to do with going to college? Does this rummage sale make a difference? Does it matter for us? For you? I think it does.

As you go out from high school and merge into adulthood, you will have opportunities to participate in this rummage sale.

- Every Sunday, churches near your dorm or apartment will gather to worship.
- Every semester, courses will be offered in theology or world religions or philosophy.
- Every year, I am guessing that you will pilgrimage home for Christmas and maybe Easter.
- Every day, you will encounter people from diverse religious backgrounds and will have the chance to engage in dialogue about differences and similarities.

This is not a call to “convert the whole world to your view,” no, this is a call to conversation and thoughtful engagement in religious and interreligious dialogue. You are part of this church rummage sale. The faith foundation you have had here at Kenilworth Union Church is only the beginning. Your participation in this global rummage sale will influence the future of Christianity and the future of inter-religious relationships on a global scale.

Christianity is already changing. My generation, those 5 to 15 years older than you, is setting the scene, in part, by walking out of the church. 35% of my generation claims no faith tradition.
For your parents, only 17% claim no faith tradition. And for your grandparents generation, only 9% claim no faith tradition. To me, this means that my generation has said “Yes, my parents dragged me to church, but it means nothing to me.” But what will your generation say?

- My hope, during this church rummage sale, is that your generation can set a different tone.
- My hope is that your generation takes the opportunity to understand the deep and wide theology and history of the church.
- My hope is that you take this rummage sale seriously and consider how your faith and your faith tradition might impact your own life, your own generation, your own families, your children, their children.

God is at work in all of this, and I hope that you have the theological courage to participate in our rummage sale.

I’ll end with monks. Monk prayers, really. Thomas Merton was a monk from a Trappist Monastery near where I went to college. Trappist monks are pretty serious, they do not eat meat or dairy and are mainly vegan because they do not want to harm any of God’s creatures. Trappist Monks take a vow of poverty and a vow of stability – meaning that they promise to live poor and in the same place for their whole life. And Trappist Monks spend intentional time in solitude – I went there for the day, and we literally ate lunch in silence (and I saw a snake and got ticks on me…not during lunch, but while I was there… it was a pretty intense experience, all told).

Anyway, Thomas Merton became famous, in part because he spoke about non-violence during the Vietnam war, and because near the end of his life, he became interested in Asian religions and promoted East-West dialogue.
The other reason he became famous is because he told the truth about our lives. The things he said about God and spirituality were raw and true to life. In one of his prayers, he begins like this, “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.” I love this prayer. “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.”

I love this prayer it is true for us personally, often, even if we know that the general direction is graduation, or if we know exactly the college or job or thing that is next. “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.” It is true for us personally, but it is also true for us as a community. Even our best laid plans give way to surprises or bumps or sorrows or even the widest of joys. And finally, it is a rummage sale prayer, a prayer for this future church community that is building and shifting and changing and thinking and living out God’s love.

And so, I will end with that whole prayer, a prayer that one person called “the prayer that any person can pray,” a prayer that, if you remember Psalm 23 from third grade, you might recognize parts from the end, "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."\(^{172}\) Thanks be to God.
APPENDIX F:
GATHERING WATER FROM SACRED PLACES

Anticipating a shift in attendance during the summer, knowing that the congregation spends much of its time away on weekends during the months of June, July and August, I invited the congregation to collect water from the places they traveled this summer.

1. In June, I designed the water gathering packages, and set them out around the church with information on why I was collecting water. Inviting everyone to submit water.

2. During our Mission Trip to Guatemala, I invited each team to collect water from their work site, and to describe why they choose that water.
   a. One team collected water at the orphanage, at the one sink where clean, drinkable water could be gathered.
   b. Another team gathered water from the river near their worksite where the horses drank.
   c. Another team gathered water from the creek, where they had gathered water to make cement in their house building project.
   d. Another team had trouble taking this seriously, and poured Amp, a caffeinated drink they had bought at the local bodega every day, into their bottle. A less cynical person might say that the Amp really did bring their team together, and allowed them to encounter the local community at the shop, so I can see how maybe this was embodying the spirit of the project (maybe).
3. At the end of the Vacation Bible School for children age 3 through grade 6, I sent home water bottles with fifty families, so they could collect water when they were on vacation over the summer.

**Water collected from**

*Comments about water collecting*
- Green Lake, WI
- *16th Annual KUC Youth Choir retreat.*
- Golf, IL
- 9-8-2015 *Rain water*
- Jordan River, Israel
- *May 2010*
- Vail, Colorado
- *Summer Vacation in Vail*
- Kennebunkport
- Jackson Hole
- Red Cedar Lake, Birchwood, WI
- Wedding in Kansas City
- Bay Head NJ Atlantic Ocean
- Seagull Lake MN
- Baptism Falls WI
- Long Island Sound, Beach down the road
- Jordan River, Israel
- Wheeler Lake, Lakewood WI
- *Family Cabin since 1979*
- Catfish Lake
- Guatemala
- *From many sites: the safe water at the orphanage, the dirty river used for making cement, the amp used to caffeinate, the retreat center water*
- Water from Northern Ireland
- White Lake, WI
- Nicolet Bay and Newport State Park in Door County
- Lake of the Ozarks Missouri
- Straits of Mackinac St Ignance, MI
WATER GATHERING: A MAP OF SACRED PLACES
APPENDIX G:

NARRATIVE INQUIRY: STORYTELLING RESEARCH THAT DEVELOPS BAPTISMAL IDENTITY

Narrative inquiry creates a robust qualitative research project. Using narrative inquiry to explore this value-reality gap, I spent a year raising awareness about the promises made at baptism through education, liturgy and storytelling, helping the congregation more mindfully and actively build intergenerational relationships as a manifestation of the promises already made at baptism. Because Kenilworth Union has more than two thousand members and is corporate sized church with many micro-communities within the wider church, narrative inquiry allowed me to have a broad impact, collecting stories as data from every generation within the church.173

At the heart of narrative inquiry is a collection of narratives, called field notes, with “experience as the driving impulse.”174 Narrative inquiry gave me a platform to create field notes from the widest variety of micro-communities within Kenilworth Union, wherein I became a curator of baptismal artifacts and photographs, reflections on baptismal experiences, and my own journal entries of encountering baptismal stories.175 While photographs and artifacts were evocative, unveiling what visual narrative researcher Hedy Beck calls a resonance across stories and a common ground on which to share lived experience, I was surprised to find that it was visual experience of baptism itself – as has already been alluded to the two narratives above – which had the most powerful effect, “evoking memory in our lives” as we constructed and reconstructed the story of our own baptism, and that of our children.176

In the same way that one shakes or agitates a Polaroid picture in order for the image to be revealed, I agitated the congregation about baptism for a year in order for a baptismal identity to be revealed. I taught, preached and used liturgies about baptism; I made room for parents to tell their children about the story of the child’s baptism; I more deliberately connected baptism to
confirmation; I told my call story through the lens of baptism; I invited the congregation to collect water from sacred places in order to evoke memory and conversations about baptism; I talked with preschoolers about the sacrament of baptism; I created games for youth group about baptism; I led activities on mission trips about baptism; I connected just about everything I did for the year to the sacrament of baptism. Through all of this I listened, reflected and drank deeply of literature about baptism. Family stories, photographs, lived experience, conversations, interviews and field notes all came together to form the basis of research for this project.

Being rooted in narrative inquiry, the evaluation of this project stands within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space which Clandinin and Connelly describe as (1) personal and social (2) past, present and future, and (3) place and space. Within the congregation, the personal and social context is impacted by the fact that the relationship between newcomers and the old guard, the clergy, board and committees, individuals, relatives and neighbors, and the congregation-at-large alongside the wider church and cultural context all shape the articulated baptismal narratives. For example, those in the old guard have a vested interest in the history of baptism at Kenilworth Union, and have stories and photographs of past baptisms which helped to illuminate the reality of baptism at Kenilworth Union, while newcomers each come with their own stories from far-flung communities, impacting the imagined future of the church. The congregation-at-large has a communal experience of baptisms, while each individual has a rich personal history of baptism, not just at Kenilworth Union, but at the baptisms of friends, nieces, grandchildren or godsons at different churches across the country and world.

The past, present and perceived future of the congregation, as well as the temporal dimension of religious history both in the United States and across Christian and biblical history also shaped the telling and retelling of stories. For example, the history of baptism participation
at Kenilworth Union impacted the very questions I asked. Discovering that half of the baptisms at Kenilworth Union occurred within a twenty year period meant that I sought to find out what kind of community commitment, if any, was different in those two decades, and how faithful participation might continue for those baptized in that twenty-year period. Additionally, the history of baptism across the centuries impacted the way I heard the congregation’s stories, particularly understanding Kenilworth Union to be a congregation in transition between Christendom and Post-Christendom. Post-baptismal rituals suggested in this research would still be meaningful in Christendom, but become even more critical when understanding the cultural impact of Post-Christendom on the ever-shrinking levels of participation of families and children at church.

Finally, an understanding of place and space is revealed in photo and story, as are the photos lost or not taken, and the stories forgotten or untold. For example, when baptized publically in the sanctuary, parents could dig up proud photos taken by the font as if to certify or remember God’s promises made there, but when baptized in the chapel privately, or in the kitchen sink or hospital bed or at a sacred riverbank, there was no such photo documentation, as if to say that the camera was too intrusive to be allowed at such a sacred moment.

Being able to draw together and take notice of the three-dimensional space of narrative inquiry requires what Clandinin and Connelly call “wakefulness.” In following the multiple threads within and between the narratives I collected in my field notes, I wakefully watched for synthesis and confluence, dissonance and discord, seeking ways to tell and retell the collected narratives. Wakefulness means attending to the ways in which the stories come together within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space noticing how they shift and change as stories are collected.
Rooted in Van Manen’s *Researching Lived Experience*, narrative inquiry is connected to phenomenological research, seeking to apply *logos* (language and thoughtfulness) to phenomenon (an aspect of lived experience), in order to unpack the nature of that lived experience. In the case of developing a baptismal identity, *logos* is the integration of the story of one’s life with the story of God, and the specific aspect of lived experience is the phenomenon of baptism, at once shared and personal.\(^{179}\) As Sensing explains, narrative develops identity because it embeds the world with meaning instead of attending to merely a scientific description of the world. Narrative allowed me, as researcher, to listen to the multi-vocal – or as Sensing calls it, the *hetroglossial* – narrative within the always changing context, constructing and reconstructing identity.\(^{180}\) My job, as researcher, has been to weave together the emerging themes using the three-dimensional landscape, in order to expose the expressed baptismal identities. Out of the collected narratives, a communal baptismal identity can be formed and reformed, even as individuals within the community form and reform their own baptismal identity.

There have been some risks. On the one hand, some researchers critique narrative inquiry, saying that the closer relationship of the researcher to the community being studied leads to “research contamination” and has been “criticized for the researcher studying people just like her.”\(^{181}\) However, the benefit to such relationship is that it can “offer richness and depth and allow insights that would otherwise not be possible.”\(^{182}\) Additionally, since the researcher is in relationship with those in the research context, it is necessary to “maintain respect for the dignity of participants as individuals.”\(^{183}\) This means knowing that some portions of the congregation might be unwilling to share stories or participate, while for those who do participate, their stories must be attended to with care.
Lastly, storytelling and general participation by some or all may not in the end create or lead to a baptismal identity as I might hope. In the end, because of the nature of narrative inquiry, there is a sense that this work of developing a baptismal identity is incomplete, always a work in progress, and the narrative research can, at best, only mark one moment within the wider work of living into baptismal identity at Kenilworth Union Church. Within this research project, then, I cannot tell every story, nor would that be interesting or helpful. Therefore, as researcher, I have woven together several narratives, articulating a communal baptismal identity at the corner of joy and sorrow that continues to form and be formed, even as individuals within the community continue to form and reform their own baptismal identity.
APPENDIX H:

BAPTISM DATA USED AT A CHURCH BOARD RETREAT

The data below was used at a November 7, 2015 board meeting.

1. The first chart outlines the baptism data from the birth of the church until 2014.

2. The second chart outlines Sunday School registration from 1990-2015, and wonders if there is a correlation between the decrease in baptisms in the last 1990s and the decrease in Sunday School registration fifteen years later, when the larger cohorts of baptized children would have been graduating out of the Sunday School program, being replaced by the smaller cohorts of baptized children.

3. The third chart outlines the confirmation classes from 1990-2015 and wonders if the class sizes have grown in relation to the larger cohorts of baptized children in the late 1990s and the early 2000, and secondarily wonders if we might expect smaller confirmation classes in the next ten years due to smaller cohorts of baptized children as of late.

4. The fourth chart shows average attendance for worship and Sunday School over the first seven weeks of the post-Labor Day program year. This is a reasonable indicator of attendance because it always includes the first “welcome back” Sunday, during which attendance is higher, as well as Columbus Day weekend when attendance is lower. Worship attendance over that period has changed yearly from 2010-2015 but has not decreased significantly in that period. While worship attendance spiked in 2014 when Bill Evertsberg was newly called as the preacher, Sunday School attendance has declined regularly from 2010-2015. Of note is the 2010 data which shows that worship attendance
and Sunday School attendance was almost equal, and the 2015 data which shows Sunday School attendance as half of worship attendance.

5. The final chart compares the Kenilworth Union Church context to the nationwide data about church attendance. It highlights some of the factors that have led to church decline, and offers a clear picture of the “nones” in our midst – those who are atheist, agnostic, spiritual but not religious, or simply do not care about religion. Nearly a quarter of the population around Kenilworth Union profess “none” as their religious identity. This indicates a significant change from the early 1990s, when baptisms were at their height.
Sacraments at Kenilworth Union Church had a slow start. While the church began worshipping in 1892, church records show that the church’s first communion service was not held until twelve years later, in 1904, when the second pastor, Dr. Horswell, was serving full time. It was another fourteen years until the first baptism in 1918; Martha Roberts (Seipp) was baptized with Rev. David Beaton presiding as pastor. Based on this data, sacraments were not central to the life of the church in its initial worship life together.

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<td>2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>2014</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

After the first baptism in 1918, there were no subsequent baptisms until 1924, and fewer than twenty baptisms per year until just after World War II. The number of baptisms peak at the height of the baby boom in 1951 with forty-five baptized that year, followed by an average of twenty-one baptisms per year from 1952-1970. The number of baptisms per year drops significantly in the nineteen seventies with a low of three baptisms in 1974 as the congregation is adjusting to the pastoral transition between Dr. Hodgson’s twenty five year leadership from 1944-1969 and Dr. Bowen’s thirty seven year leadership from 1970-2007.

Throughout the eighties and nineties, the number of baptisms per year quadrupled. In 1992 and 1994, there are two peak years of baptisms, with 101 and 121 respectively. Since 1994, the number of baptisms decreased rather consistently until 2013, when there were 20 baptisms, the lowest number since 1980. In 2014 there were 20 baptisms, and it is unknown at this point if the higher number points to a new pattern of growth or not.
Sunday School Enrollment 1999-2015

Question: What is the relationship between the baptism numbers and Sunday school enrollment?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
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<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>903</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>930</td>
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<td>994</td>
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<td>2003</td>
<td>960</td>
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<td>2004</td>
<td>949</td>
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<td>2005</td>
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<td>2010</td>
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<td>2013</td>
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<td>2014</td>
<td>542</td>
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<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>464</td>
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</table>
Confirmation 1990-2015

Question: what is the relationship between the baptism numbers and confirmation 13 years later?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Baptized</th>
<th>Year</th>
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<th>Year</th>
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<td>26</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>60</td>
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<td>2015</td>
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<td>1996</td>
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<td>1999</td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>58</td>
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Worship and Sunday School Average Attendance
Based on average of first seven weeks of the year (Sept/Oct) 8, 9 and 10:30 am

Question: what is the relationship between worship and Sunday School participation?
what is the relationship between baptisms and Sunday School participation?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sunday School Attendance</th>
<th>Worship Attendance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>403</td>
<td>421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>316</td>
<td>382</td>
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<td>2012</td>
<td>274</td>
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<td>2013</td>
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<td>345</td>
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<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>512</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>382</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
NEW REALITIES: The religious diversity of the area surrounding Kenilworth Union paints a picture that is not uncommon across much of the United States. Below is a chart from MissionInsight that compares the religious preferences within a two-mile radius of Kenilworth Union to the United States average for religious preferences. Of note is the fact that the area around Kenilworth Union has a slightly higher Catholic and Orthodox population than the US average, and the percentage of people who profess no spiritual preference is slightly lower in the area near the church than it is across the country; the area is more Catholic and more religious overall than the US average.¹

Building on the religious landscape data nationally, in her book Christianity After Religion, Diana Butler Bass talks at length about the data on an emerging cohort of religiously unaffiliated adults who now make up America's third largest "religious group." This group is referred to as the 'nones,' those who identify as atheists, agnostics, secular humanists or even "nothing in particular." Based on the local demographic information above, there is a rising population of 'nones' claiming no spiritual preference who make up twenty-five percent of adults living in the area surrounding Kenilworth Union.²

In his book American Religion, Mark Chaves identifies several markers in religious participation that might be at work at Kenilworth Union. He traces the roots of liberal protestant decline to (1) lower birth rates in families from the liberal protestant traditions over several generations, (2) lower participation by youth leading to decreased participation when those youth become adults and (3) decreased pressure for conservative protestants to change to liberal protestant denominations when they experience upward economic mobility (4) fewer current adults having grown up in active Christian households.³ While Chaves is not addressing baptism explicitly, the factors that contributed to the decline in baptisms at Kenilworth Union in the late nineties through today are likely associated with the general trend of liberal protestant decline.

This presentation on Family Prayer takes families through James Fowler’s faith stages so that parents can begin to understand how their children are learning and growing in their faith. Then, the presentation turns toward Howard Gardner’s theory of Multiple Intelligences, to show parents how each child might learn and understand their faith in a number of different ways.

The presentation concludes by inviting the participants to map their family at the matrix of Fowler and Gardner, at the corner of Stages of Faith and Multiple Intelligences. Together, we discuss which prayer practices might fit into each category, and how a family might adopt a cluster of practices that allow the whole family to engage fully in prayer.
This presentation took place on February 8, 2015 and was attended by sixteen people, most of whom have grown children and grandchildren.

The whole presentation can be accessed online

http://prezi.com/98n3xoi2svb/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy
This presentation uses the Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (BEM) document to explore the full range of understandings of baptism within the Christian tradition. I organized the images of baptism from BEM into seven major themes (1) being changed in baptism (2) being moved by baptism (3) baptism making old symbols new again (4) baptism as solidarity with Christ (5) our human response to baptism (6) the Holy Spirit in baptism (7) the eschatological hope of baptism into the future.

This presentation was made on March 1, 2015, and was attended by eight people, one of whom was preparing for her grandchild to be baptized the following week; her grandchild and her daughter both live out of state but at last report are likely to be moving to the area in the next year.

The whole presentation can be accessed online here:

http://prezi.com/npu7urj9urvr/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy
For a fuller history of Kenilworth Union Church, see Appendix A.

See Appendix B for the church’s baptismal history and Appendix H for baptismal data.


See Appendix G for an explanation of the use of the narrative inquiry research method.


Jean D. Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 188.


Genesis 1:1


Genesis 1:3

John chapter one echoes such light, and ties the full narrative of Christ’s life, death and resurrection to this primordial event of light spoken into darkness.


Deuteronomy 10:18 and elsewhere; from Micah 6:8


Not surprisingly, one of the young adults interviewed in this article is from Kenilworth Union Church, reinforcing the persistent troubles of young people in the church’s community.

Rubin, Keilman and Cullotta, “Demand Soars.”


Name changed for anonymity and privacy.


Habib, “Promises.”


See sermon “Seen, Called, Noticed” of Appendix D for a deeper exegesis of the scriptural convictions around parents bringing their children to sacred places.


“Litany as antiphony” comes from Jenson, Story and Promise, 182. The whispered confession is from Marilyn Bennett Alexander who has herself seen the need to whisper such a confession because of some church’s rejection of lesbian and gay members who were baptized as infants, and yet are excluded from such congregational promises as adults. Marilyn Bennett Alexander. We Were Baptized Too: Claiming God’s Grace for Lesbians and Gays (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 70.


Lythcott-Haims, How to Raise an Adult, 66.

Deresiewicz, Excellent Sheep, 25.


Suniya Luthar articulates a similar catch-twenty-two and suggests that supporting the caregiver adults, often mothers, who surround these young people can be the biggest help for the youth themselves because an engaged loving caregiver can help them combat meaninglessness. Suniya Luthar, "The Mental Price of Affluence." Interview by Audrey Hamilton. Speaking of...


49 For example, the Service of Thanksgiving on the morning of Thanksgiving Day has grown in participation over the last four years, showing that the congregation is hungry for rituals that offer gratitude to God.


54 Romans 8:26, Psalm 42:7


57 Jenson, *Story and Promise*, 86.

58 Matthew 18:20, Ecclesiastes 4:12


68 In the same way that Noah’s flood is helpful as a way to unpack the power of water in baptism, Moses crossing the sea, or drawing water from a rock, and the Israelites crying out for God at the River of Babylon could equally be ways to unpack the water metaphors for people of any age. Additionally, this work of choosing a theme like water, and then using it to teach God’s story throughout the year is deeply rich. It has the power to root the congregation’s attention thematically and tangibly through equally powerful stories from today and across the ages.
69 Nora Murphy, *Knitting the Threads of Time: Casting Back to the Heart of our Craft* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2009), 11.

70 Name has been changed for anonymity and privacy.

71 Name has been changed for anonymity and privacy.


76 Barrett, *What was Lost,* 62.

77 Barrett, *What was Lost,* 62.


79 See Appendix B for a complete history of baptism at Kenilworth Union Church.


84 John Hall, *Confessing the Faith,* 309.

85 John Hall, *Confessing the Faith,* 311.


87 Hatch, *From Exorcism to Ecstasy,* 103.


89 Calvin, John. *Institutes of Christian Religion.* (Book 17, Chapter 1).

90 Psalm 139:13
In fact, because confirmation is explicitly a reaffirmation of the baptismal vows, the confirmation program is designed specifically to maximize a sense of belonging. While the Sunday morning confirmation classroom-style meetings are designed to ask important questions about faith, the requirements beyond the classroom seek to connect confirmands with their parents and the church community. Each confirmand participates in service hours within the Kenilworth Union community, attends nine worship services and meets one-on-one with a mentor – an adult chosen by the confirmand from within the congregation. The formal mentor relationship helps foster belonging, but worship and service live into the visions intergenerational mentoring as well since, often, worship is attended alongside parents, and the service projects allow the confirmand to spend time with additional compassionate adults who get to know them.


Luke 22:19


“Further Up and Further In” is a phrase Smith uses from The Last Battle by C. S. Lewis that points toward living a Christ-like life in the Spirit. This deeper experience of “Growing up in
God” is also described by Smith as “adulting in Christ.” Smith, Christian Ritualizing and the Baptismal Process, 59 and 130.


114 The Confirmation Wilderness Program is designed both to teach an intensive version of the Confirmation curriculum, and to experience the wilderness as a co-teacher, where the lakes and forests, trails and winds themselves offer up wisdom about God and God’s world. The Confirmation Centennial Program uses lecture, discussion and multimedia to teach the Christian faith, taking seriously the weekly rhythm of Sabbath and worship, offering multiple chances to build relationships with classmates and mentors, bumping elbows with the congregation before and after class each week. In 2015, 11 youth participated in the wilderness program and 49 participated in the classroom program. At the end of the year, during the ritual of confirmation, each young person was invited forward for a blessing and a generous portion of water on their head at the baptismal font, “hear again and remember that you are a child of God, and you belong to God now and always,” and then received a confirmation blessing with the sign of the cross on their forehead, “you are confirmed in your faith, and are loved by God now and forever.”


118 On Children’s Day, the third graders, who have spent the year learning scripture by heart, ritually recite the biblical promises: the ten commandments, Psalm 23, the greatest commandment, the beatitudes and the Lord’s Prayer. This reciting of scripture that is now written on their heart becomes one of the ways that they – as third graders – can live into the congregational promises that even they made to their younger siblings at their baptism.


123 Carol McDonald. email to the author, October 16, 2015.


126 Smith, Christian Ritualizing and the Baptismal Process, 192.


128 Crossan, The Dark Interval, 40.


Matthew 22 and Micah 6 on the church seal carved in stone along the cloister walk.


Now with under three thousand members in the United States and fifty thousand globally, it is a tradition marked by the teaching of Emanuel Swedenborg, 1688-1772. “Denominational Partnership,” Swedenborgian House of Studies, Pacific School of Religion, accessed March 1, 2015, shs.psr.edu/about/denominational_partnerships.asp.

Swedenborg, Emanuel. *A Compendium of the Theological and Spiritual Writings of Emanuel Swedenborg*. (Boston, MA: Crosby and Nichols, and Otis Clapp, 1854) 145.


“The Model Suburban Community” is an advertising phrase used by Joseph Sears when he was developing his 300 acre plot of land into what is now the Village of Kenilworth. Campbell, Sally R. *I Thank My God Upon Every Remembrance: The Kenilworth Union Church 1892-1982*. (Kenilworth: The Kenilworth Union Church, 1992) iii.

The other Kenilworth church is Church of the Holy Comforter, part of the Episcopal Diocese of Chicago.


Kenilworth Union Church records, June 30, 2014 at the close of the fiscal year.

Baptism is ordinarily administered to children or grandchildren of members. Bibles are distributed to third graders who complete a program that includes reciting several passages of scripture by heart. Confirmation and church membership is conferred upon ninth graders by profession of faith after a nine-month program, while new members are received as adults by profession of faith after a one-hour program. Weddings and funerals are ordinarily held for members or their relatives.

Acts of the Apostles 2:41


Names changed for anonymity and privacy.


Names changed for anonymity and privacy.


Markus Bockmuehl, *The Remembered Peter*, (Tubingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck 2010) 205

Tyson, Neil deGrasse. “2015 has the earliest possible.” 5 September 2015, 1:12 p.m. Tweet.

BBC. “Egypt’s Jewish community’s lost future.” 18 September 2014. Online video clip.


First Corinthians 3. Common English Bible.


www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p031k44r.


https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/first-things-first-audio-only


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=phxAubdeeNA

Alice Mann and Gil Rendel, *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations* (The Alban Institute, 2003), 182.

Jean D. Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 188.


Bach, “The Place of the Photograph.”


