

**The Congregation's Congregation**  
**Rev. Kim Wildszewski**  
**December 15, 2019**

Rev. Kim's final Sunday service with UUCWC before Sabbatical, we gather to celebrate our newest members and consider the gifts of shared ministry.

*The Messy and Imperfect Beloved Community, by my colleague the Rev. Laila Ibrahim:*

*I have been going to the same church for nearly thirty years. I have filled a variety of leadership positions, from OWL teacher to Board president, usher coordinator, to stewardship co-chair. And in all those years, my congregation has had ample opportunity to disappoint me.*

*I am disappointed when people don't think my justice project is the one we should collectively work on; I am disappointed when people want different music than I do; I am disappointed that we don't all agree that our Children's Ministry is the most important priority in the church; I am disappointed that people don't give enough time, talent or treasure to the church as I do. I am disappointed...well, you get the idea. In nearly thirty years of relationship, there have been lots of disappointments.*

*Two or three times over the years, I have been so disappointed that I seriously questioned remaining in my congregation. I have doubted its ability to provide the salvation of which we speak: lived beloved community. On those occasions I have thought, screw it. I can just stop going to church for a while or ....forever. But staying away has never helped me through such times. Rather, coming in closer, telling people about my spiritual crisis – listening, sharing, caring, and worshipping – have helped me know that this is where I belong, even when church is the source of my frustration and disappointment.*

*Because we are not in church to be with people who want to sing the same music, or rally for the same cause, or attend the same retreats. We are in church to learn to love better. And this can only happen when we love past our disappointments and return to a place of acceptance and affirmation. This is true in our personal lives, in our work lives, and in our church lives. It is a deep spiritual practice.*

*There is really only one choice: Between imperfect community and no community. Again and again, we are all called to choose to commit ourselves to building a more just, more diverse, and yet ever messy and imperfect beloved community.*

In May of 2014 I was 29 years old and you called me to be your next settled minister. That's right, 29. As Joe Schenk said once, you hid that well. To which I responded, we all hid some things during that process, didn't we?

Those eight days of candidating, of interviewing with you all, have lodged into my memory like the smell of my childhood home or an old song that I hope never leaves my muscle memory. You were cautious of me. Surprised by my age, my ability to remember your names, my

theology, my sexual orientation; there were things you had to work out. And it was true for me of you.

It seemed everyone here hugged and kissed one another; Tara and I would return to the hotel and say – so *who* is married? This place had more chalice symbols than I had seen in any other space; but still my conversations with some of you made it clear that it served as symbol of what you were not rather than what your spirit could grow to be. I had no interest in defending my age, my orientation, my love of sacred texts. There were things I had to work out. Because I had just left a ministerial position after 3 years and what the data showed and what it still shows today is that 85% of seminary graduates leave ministry within the first five years and never look back.

I was on that trajectory and this – you – were not only a test of fit but call.

Who really knows what allowed for the scales to tip in one way or another for any of us; that allowed us to dream enough to say yes to this portion of the adventure. I only know today, on the precipice of leave-taking for even this short time, it's almost impossible for me to imagine it now. That once you were strangers. That once, I wondered if our hearts could find a home within one another's.

For over half a decade, I have come to this place and to you. And within that time I have changed in spirit, in title, in theology. In these years together I became a parent, twice over. Gone from solo minister to supervising minister to senior minister. I have made mistakes and worked to forgive yours. I have celebrated joys – yours and mine. I have buried people we love, and dedicated children to the stars from which they came. I have officiated your marriages and cried with you when your partnerships have ended. Doubt and despair has overwhelmed me but the requirement to come to you with a different word than defeat has grown my soul at a speed faster than birth years could mark.

And now sabbatical. This gift and grace. An offering of time and energy. Amorphous things. Unholdable. And yet, still it feels so very tangible – even the idea of what Sabbatical may mean feels like a parental figure who has stopped me mid run through the living room, afraid I'm about to crash into the glass table. Sabbatical takes a minister by the shoulders, breathes, looks her in the eyes and says sternly and lovingly, "I want you to slow down."

It is a gift and an expression of grace, that interruption for safekeeping. But let me remind you, if you have ever stopped a child mid run – do they say thank you? Do they say, oh good point mom! No. No of course they don't! So I hope you can appreciate, that as I come to this odd moment of sabbatical, of slowing down, I rather resent it too.

"Staying away has never helped me through," the reading said. "Rather, coming in closer, telling people about my spiritual crisis – listening, sharing, caring, and worshiping – have helped me know that this is where I belong, even when church is the source of my frustration and disappointment." My speed, my depletion, I might add.

But now it is time for me to slow down.

And it will be odd, hard, a sorrow some days, to do so without you.  
And still, a requirement, I realize, if I am to return to you any good.

I want to say, I've wondered a million times, when is the right time to go on Sabbatical? When is the right time to interrupt the norm of a growing and robust organization? With a new Minister for Congregational Life, a stewardship campaign that must be successful in order to keep her on; a Capital Campaign itching to break ground but cannot, do you hear me? Cannot without another round of fundraising, 16 new members, new models of shared ministry, and the regular but important and deep pastoral need in every corner of this space. When will it ever be the right time?

A few days ago I shared a *Washington Post* article on FaceBook, some of you I know saw it, about an African American preacher in DC who announced his sabbatical from the pulpit. He says at one point,

“When I started, I was working seven days a week. A member of the church at the time — an older lady — said, ‘Why do you work every day?’ I said, ‘The devil doesn’t take a day off.’ She said, ‘Why is the devil your role model? ‘Jesus models that we need to rest.’”

The job doesn’t allow for a comfortable answer to the question of when is right to take leave. The job, the calling, the want to serve people we love is alive and persistent and never ending, and this never ending-ness can cause pastors and preachers and helpers of whatever kind to believe we cannot leave.

But be that Devil or Capitalism – they may be the same – part of this process for me is to ask out loud – Who is my role model? What am I worshipping? And if I am supposed to be the model for how to care for our spirit, for how to live some counter cultural life, what do I need to learn, what do I need to say yes to, so that we can all say yes to the rest we deserve and need?

So it’s not the perfect time, perhaps, because that doesn’t exist. But it is time. And the truth is, you’re going to be just fine.

I want to read a piece of a sermon to you from 2017 that I’ve been thinking a lot about lately. It was New Member Sunday, just like today. Karla Robinson, John’s wife, had died only a week or two before; and she and John had only become members a few weeks before her death.

“The week before Karla passed I sat at the end of her couch holding her feet in my hands. I asked her, is there anything you want me to know? She said, I need you to tell them (this congregation) that I didn’t come here to die.

“If you were one of the few who got to meet Karla you will know this is true. She came here to love and to live; dying – had she had her way - was not going to be an allowable part of the plan. And when she did pass, when the memorial service was planned to be held in this space, and the sanctuary filled with faces I had never seen, that I would never know, I, not for the first time, broke my promise and lost my nerve, all my expertise went out the window, all the ways I am supposed to be the one who could hold it all, and I cried. I wept.

“Not only for Karla or for those who love her, but because while standing in the pulpit I could see perfectly into the lobby members of this congregation bringing in food. And before that during quick hellos, I realized it was members of this congregation who were our ushers and our greeters, who came out in the ice and snow, for a woman they didn’t know.”

This congregation, this ministry, is yours. It always has and it always will be. And sometimes, the gift of a minister stepping outside of the system for a bit, is that we all come to discover that the work of the church has always been yours to do and make real. Sometimes, the gift of a minister stepping out, is the joy in realizing the power that exists outside of one person, or a staff group, that has always been alive and thriving.

So for four months we will go on an adventure again. Different than six years ago when we said yes to one another for the first time, but still a commitment of sorts, and an expression of mutual trust, of ministry not yet realized, and of needing to work some things out.

Be good to another. Vigilantly. Tell one another about your crisis. Listen. Care. Worship and bring to this place the uncomfortable questions of what you are worshiping. Actively grow a sense of belonging.

Because we need one another. And staying away has never helped anyone. I for one, will look forward to my return.

“Vine and branch we’re connected in this world,” begins Jeanne Lohmann’s poem *Shaking the Tree*. “Vine and branch we’re connected in this world, of sound and echo, figure and shadow, the leaves contingent, roots pushing against earth.

“An apple belongs to itself, to stem and tree, to air that claims it, then ground. Connections balance, each motion changes another. Precarious, hanging together, we don’t know what our lives support, and we touch in the least shift of breathing.

“Each holy thing is borrowed. Everything depends.”

Blessings on our shared sabbatical journeys.

Amen.