

**“So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”**

Today, since my timing is off and things are a little funky, I'm going to share my message to you a little differently; and if you would keep this text in mind as I tell my humble story, I think it'll help us all make a pretty meaningful connection...I am going to “boast gladly of my weaknesses” because after these days away from you, I learned some significant lessons about myself, and I know more than ever that I really need the power of Christ in my heart, in my life and in all that I do.

I went to the river because our Conference Ministry Committee directed me to as part of my training, but in the dark places of my mind, I was a little worried. You see, I have a secret. I experience what I've come to recognize as a form of “people claustrophobia.” I don't do well in overly crowded rooms. I don't especially care to share living space with strangers, and I've just learned that I don't like being trapped in the same room with the same people, talking about the same thing for days at a time.

Part of the “Jane reality” is that I need quiet, alone-time - serious space away some of the day - or a part of me just gets crazy. I have to feel that I can come and go as I want - I have to feel free. I will go through the day thoroughly putting my whole self into the world (and in this amazing and challenging time of serving as your pastor that's exactly what I believe I do), but at night, I need to crawl into a cave someplace to recharge my batteries, or I'm no good to anyone the next day. Home is sanctuary – home is peace with Don, my dogs and the birds that sing outside my kitchen window.

So, when I made the arrangements to do the History and Polity class and the General Synod for the United Church of Christ in a two-week block of time away from my husband, my home and my friends at church, I ignored that voice I've come to depend upon that wisely tells me what to do, and I signed to share a dorm, because it was a lot cheaper, and I knew that being part of the community was an important element for the whole thing. “How bad can it be?” I thought to myself...”I'm a mature woman who has learned a lot in my time and I can handle anything; this will be a piece of cake.”

Well, to quote Rowan and Martin, those crazy sages of the 60s – “Wrong again, Moose-breath!”

I must not be very mature, because I went through these past two weeks, kicking and screaming.

It began with the adventure of leaving the Midway airport area; I flew into Chicago because it saved me enough money to rent a car for two weeks. Smooth flight in – a little wait for my bag – no line at the Avis place. Found the lot, got the car, and made my way out of the airport proper in search of the main road to the freeway. This turned into a 30-minute tour of Chicago. After circling and going past the airport entrance three times, (who designed one way streets, anyhow???) I pulled out my impressive, new i-phone with its GPS feature and prayed I could figure out how to work the darned thing. A screen popped up – I typed in the streets and suddenly a map appeared with a little pin on it, which showed me exactly where I was and how to get out. A miracle! Five minutes later, I had successfully wound my way out of the city, and finally hit the open the road.

Because I left Prescott at 4 am that day, I didn't get too far along before I sensed that I better stop for the night – exhaustion was beginning to make it unsafe to drive. Halfway between Chicago and Grand Rapids, I pulled off the highway at a Hampton Inn, checked in and went to find something to eat. It was Fathers Day, after 6 pm, and anyone who was still open for business looked promising on the outside as I drove by, but as soon as I parked the car, and opened the door to go in, I was welcomed with a waft of cigarette smoke. I made three stops before I figured out that apparently, in rural Michigan, you can still smoke in restaurants.

I'd been hoping for a nice meal and a glass of wine, but dinner this night was from Subway.

The rental car I was given worked fine the first day, but when I slipped into the driver's seat to leave the next morning, the electronic mechanism that moves the seat back and forth refused to move from the place where I'd left it, which was all the way back so I could get out easier. I think the internal switch was broken. I called Avis and secured an exchange, but this only could happen in Grand Rapids because there were no Avis places on the way, so for the remaining two hours of my journey, I drove with my fleece hoodie wadded up behind me as a pillow so I could reach the pedals. I had been given instructions to go to the airport to exchange cars, so the trusty i-phone was put to use again, but this time, it couldn't help me with the ripped up roads of an airport under construction – by the time I left with a new car, I could give anyone directions on where to go in this airport – another adventure in finding my way. This was Lesson One: I'm not in charge, but I think I am.

When I finally reached Aquinas College, I was a mess, though still mostly positive. I knew I needed peace and quiet, and I needed to get unpacked and nest in. However, my lessons in learning more about myself would continue; each moment after my arrival was an adventure in living with strangers – nice strangers with their own distinct personalities (as I have mine!), but people completely new to me, none-the-less.

They brought with them new noises, new routines, little privacy, constant companions 24/7; and over the course of two weeks, I had nowhere to go for escape, because there was so little free time. I resented the intrusion on my privacy, and grumbled about it in my head the whole time. Lesson Two in recognition of my weakness had shown itself: **I don't always get what I want, and I don't like it.**

The days in between my arriving to Grand Rapids and returning home were an odd combination of really fast times and really slow ones. Lecture days in our classroom about the History and Polity went slowly – General Synod days in downtown Grand Rapids went fast – much of it was confusing because there's an incredible amount of information related to this history of the United Church of Christ that I still need to process. Add to this worship each day in a loud, cavernous room with a sound system meant for a stadium, and the constant drone of more than three thousand voices talking, laughing, singing – well, you know how I was feeling by now! Getting back to a tiny dorm room with a door to shut was starting to look pretty good. Enter Lesson Three: **I often don't see the blessings right before my eyes.**

At the Synod, I shared meals with, and heard from, some amazing “almost famous” pioneers in our denomination. I was inspired by stories of church folk who never gave up as the UCC created itself, and I truly enjoyed the loud, but visually beautiful and meaningful worship experiences. Nineteen resolutions had been put before the delegates and visitors – everyone who wanted to speak was given the opportunity to do so at some point – and Polity became a real word for me. I got caught up in the emotion of an issue of Single Governance which I will share with you later, and I worried when action on this resolution presented on the Synod floor looked like it would divide our church over potential racism issues.

Back at the college, I ate cafeteria food, listened to lectures, slept in a tiny bed with sheets that attacked me, stayed up past midnight most nights to keep on top of my concerns at home and woke up at 6 every morning to start all over again - always, always in company of thirty-four others going through this process with me.

In short, my real life was suspended during this time I was away from you – I missed the routines of my days, and I was living in “slo-mo.” I even felt a little guilty because I was annoyed with the living situation and how the History class was presented. (Let's say it was really designed to just offer information for anyone who wanted to learn it, and was not quite what I expected for a graduate-level, college seminary course). You had given me such a wonderful gift by sending me away to receive education and experience, but because I seem to struggle with so much togetherness, and had higher (and likely unrealistic) expectations about how the course should run, I was uncomfortable and I whined a little. I was NOT a happy camper. Lesson Four: **Sometimes, I don't appreciate what I receive at face value – I want more.**

The final leg of this journey involved spending an interesting and slightly distressing night with cousins in Chicago – a mixed bag of seeing and experiencing family that, by this point, I had little patience for. As I was writing this, I was sitting in my cousin's living room, drinking my second cup of coffee and thinking about finding my way back to Midway to dump the car and wait for my flight home. I love my family, but this time, I was ready to get away. Lesson Five: **Occasionally, I am inconsistent with the patience required for understanding.**

After hearing all this, you're probably wondering what was good about my trip to Grand Rapids? It might seem to you that I lost track of why I went in the first place. You may be thinking that I feel the days spent away from Prescott were a waste of time, money and energy – that what happened on this journey is something I should just write about in a diary; something I should add to a list of "things in my life I should never do again."

Well, dear friends, please know that none of it was a waste of time. On the practical side, I would like to tell you that soon I'll share with you details about how we're pioneers ourselves – the fact that you have invited me to serve as your pastor is groundbreaking stuff in the UCC – and what we do with our time together is of great interest to the whole denomination.

On the affective, more emotional side, I have to tell you that I took from this crazy experience some amazing and enlightening truths about myself, about our life in this congregation, about the UCC itself, and about God, Jesus and the Spirit. And when I considered the Scripture readings for today, I was struck with how much I could relate to Paul and the description he put out there about being aware of one's weaknesses; because in spite of how this all sounds and how I felt, hidden within the chaos I actually did find the influence of Jesus in my life - and with it, the recognition that I could open myself up to what two weeks on the road could give me, to bring to you.

Let me tell you about some of them.

I saw Jesus in the eyes of the man who anointed my head and blessed me at the Healing Worship on Thursday night. The timing of this was perfect – a day after my nerve-wracking travel, in a beautiful, golden room lined with mirrors and soft lighting. Quiet music, forgiveness thick in the air – the weight of his hand on my shoulder and the sense of a finger placing perfumed oil on my forehead lingered through the next day. I needed to remember what and whom such a giant gathering was all about; this service gave me a new center point and refreshment from those negative feelings that had been nagging at me. Jesus healed me that night.

I heard Jesus in the voice tied to an amazing message the next evening, by Reverend Otis Moss III. Rev. Moss has been installed in Trinity Church in Chicago to heal the

damage that occurred as a result of negative press created by his predecessor during President Obama's candidacy this past fall.

He preached the sermon on Friday night in true, old-time gospel fashion – a first-time experience for me. The focus was on our Comma theme, and in a two-minute declaration of how important proper use of punctuation is in our faith as members of the United Church of Christ, Rev. Moss demonstrated that zeal and intense emotion behind the words we send out as pastors can lift you up out of any hole and drop you into the arms of Jesus – the safe place for your soul.

I felt Jesus when I became aware that the sort of judgmental tension one might feel in a crowd wasn't present...this assembly of persons literally demonstrated that "no matter who you are" is absolutely what the UCC is all about. All types of people in all types of relationships mingled – colors and cultures, gays and straight, young and old – the blend of people who call the UCC their faith home felt as buoyant as leaves floating in the rapids outside the Synod hall. One of my classmates expressed the relief at not having to feel the need to apologize for who she was – this living example of Jesus' love for all shimmered in every gathering.

I tasted Jesus during Communion the last night of Synod – the resolution on Single Governance had passed (with open dissension), and while there are more pieces to that resolution that need to be worked out, we all gathered as one body of Christ to support each other and send everyone home with new purpose and conviction to do God's work. This church has an amazing history of cooperation and respect...and by taking Bread and Wine together, we remembered that Jesus loves us all, even when we don't agree.

Finally, I touched Jesus when I offered and received "good bye" hugs from many people in that History and Polity class. In spite of the things that frustrated me, I met and made friends with quite a few amazing and inspirational people that I expect to hear from again. You can't go through so much time with others and not be touched by their stories and their commitment to what they're doing for God in our world. With each day's experiences, I realized that resolutions come and go, churches start and die, but God's people keep the faith alive – and so many of the folks in my class made me realize that we're all in this together - they earned my respect and stoked the hope I have in my heart for the future of the UCC, nationally and here in Prescott.

Yesterday, as I got into my rental car and headed for another zany trip through Chicago to find my cousin, I knew time away from this adventure would allow all the emotions, knowledge and wonderings to find good places in my heart and mind; I just need time to process it all.

As for my "Lessons" – well, I think I'll offer them to God as a humble gift in exchange for forgiveness: I know the influence and love of Jesus will sneak into the stubborn parts of me that need more refining. I believe God is at the center of what I do, and my

human self, recognizing what's weak in me, will continue to look to Jesus Christ as the One who can make me stronger for God. And, dear friends, if you recognize yourself in any of my Lessons, I invite you to journey with me.

I am convinced we're headed for bright, new days of faith and growth with the help of God, Jesus and the Spirit.

I missed you. Thank you for your prayers and emails while I was away; they were true gifts! And like Dorothy says, "There's no place like home."

Amen.