

Hello, my name is Margo, and I'm a recovering Catholic. This is my last meeting with you for awhile, and I would like to share with you the progress that you as a community have helped me to achieve spiritually, emotionally, psychologically, and physically over the past year. As I share my thoughts and reflections with you today, I do so as a leader who recognizes that she would not have the opportunity to stand and speak had she not had the support and love of this team. I also recognize and appreciate Curran's generosity and confidence in allowing me to commandeer the pulpit this morning. This is a truly unique experience that few pastors would ever allow a parishioner to have, particularly a young person. You see, there seems to be a perception among many Christian believers that the youth of the church do not have the spiritual maturity or leadership skills necessary to address and guide their brothers and sisters in Christ. We are grateful to have a pastor and many church leaders who recognize that there are young people amongst us who have something to offer to the entire congregation. I hope my message today will further reinforce this belief amongst you all.

I am incredibly blessed. When Curran asked, or rather told, me to attend the "Tapestry" conference that took place in Indianapolis June 26-29, I was in a situation where I would be able to take the time and bear the financial responsibility to do so. Tapestry was a gathering of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, intersex, and queer people, and their allies who were not only members of the UCC, but also the Disciples of Christ and American Baptists. While I was there, I was privileged to enter into discussion, prayer, and worship with people of varying ages, races, backgrounds, socio-economic conditions, education, talents, and experiences. I met young seminarians, experienced pastors, and proud parents of GLBT sons and daughters. I enjoyed the sermons of two renowned theological scholars, as well as that of a young UCC minister who delivered a message of wisdom that far surpassed his years. I entered into discussion and debate.

I entered into prayer. I entered into song. And by the end of my time there, I was inspired, changed, and renewed.

On the first night of the conference, I heard a sermon by Dr. Rita Brock. She shared with us her scholarly research involving Christian perceptions of creation in the first ten centuries of the Church. To make a long story short, Dr. Brock contended that God created this world, the one that surrounds us today, as paradise. When presented with this term: “paradise,” many of us think of heaven, but Dr. Brock contended that these two “destinations” are really quite different. God created this world as a living paradise with all of the love and tools that we need to not only survive, but to thrive in warmth and happiness in relationship with each other. Heaven was created as an afterlife and something completely different to provide for those who had already experienced this paradise. The upshot of her message to us was that we are so focused on doing what we need to do as individuals to gain entrance into heaven, that we neglect the cultivation of the paradise that surrounds us in the now. Or, in other words, we as Christians are not fulfilling our responsibilities as caretakers of God’s creation.

I witnessed a great deal of debate about Dr. Brock’s contention. Many said that this world could not be paradise. It is too dirty, too hurtful, too sinful to qualify. I’m sure many of you are thinking the same thing. Visions of the latest news from the Middle East, Indonesia, North Korea, and particularly, our struggles at home with immigration, environmentalism, and social justice are dancing in the back of your head as proof, but take a moment to see it through my eyes. Are you ready to believe that God basically goofed when he created this world? Are we not to believe Psalm 24 that God created the world in which we live with intentionality and purpose? Are we to deny the beauty we see and experience in those moments of peace and solace that occur on a breezy summer nights or as we watch the sun set with someone we love?

Are you ready to believe that God has instead created hell on earth? If so, are you then prepared to believe in an angry God who has been vengeful from the beginning of creation—punishing humans before they had the chance to ruin anything themselves? I am not.

It is my belief that God has given us a paradise, but we cannot see it because we as a society have erected walls that obstruct our view of it. Instead of beauty, we see our own struggles with health, jobs, finances, children, parents, coworkers, and friends. We see our own prejudices that we carry about the old, young, uneducated, poor, culturally diverse, physically or mentally disabled, politically conservative, and queer. Here in the Open Prairie community we believe ourselves to be “open and affirming,” which may, for all intents and purposes, be true. We certainly let all different types of people come and worship with us, but I would venture to say that we have all been guilty, at one time or another, of building a wall between ourselves and those “others.”

Here at Open Prairie we have done some outstanding outreach and mission work. Our fellowship efforts are above and beyond what most other congregations expect. We support the continuing education of our pastor. We encourage our leaders to attend conferences and workshops. We have an active youth group who just spent a transformative week serving those who are not lucky enough to enjoy the material comforts that most of us do. We challenge each other. We debate respectfully. We are proud of what we have to offer, and we should be. We are welcoming. We love bringing new people into the church, particularly those who other churches and denominations have turned away. We see people who are “different,” who have been cast to the margins, and say, “Come in. You’re welcome here.” We think: These people are worthy of God’s love. They can come to Church with me, and I will accept them in spite of their differences. These are phenomenal intentions that are miles beyond where some of our other

brothers and sisters have camped out on the journey of progressive Christianity. However, the phrase: “in spite of,” is where this congregation gets stuck.

“In spite of” is a phrase that creates power relationships, even if they only play out in our minds and not in our actions. It weakens the love that we as a community have committed ourselves to in our covenant. “In spite of” implies that we see their differences or social labels and we are content to ignore them and welcome “others” into our church anyway. However, each time we see these differences and choose to lay them aside, it weakens our relationship with the world around us. Think about it this way. Have any of you ever gone out and done something that your parents or partner didn’t want you to do and lied about it? You know you shouldn’t have done it, so you cover it up with a complete lie, denying the reality of what happened. That’s essentially what some other churches do. When undesirables come knocking at their door, they deny that there was ever a paradise created by God and therefore trespass against God’s love. This is a blatant denial of the gifts others have to offer.

Now, how many of you have gone out and done something that your parent or partner would not want you to do, but instead of outright lying about it, you just hide it and omit the truth when asked about where you were or what you were doing? Instead, you answer indirectly. You change the subject. You do anything to keep from outright lying, but you never actually tell the truth either. These lies of omission may not seem quite as hurtful, but they can do damage as well. At Open Prairie we let “others” in and welcome them, but sometimes we omit their differences from our view of them, laying aside sexuality, economic status, and ethnicity. This is not a blatant denial of the person, but it is a reluctance to fully accept and honor him or her for his/her differences. This is a normal human response. A response that I have been guilty of at times, and I assume many of you have, as well.

We may not always recognize that we are taking this approach, but every time we do, we are taking ourselves out of “right relationship” with each other and with God. Instead of opening doors, our desire to ignore that which makes us uncomfortable, and inability to truly accept and honor one another, only builds walls. And these walls block our extraordinary view of the paradise that God has made for us. They wound the body of our community instead of allowing it to prosper and grow.

Thankfully, God does not love as humans love. God does not look down on each of us and pick and choose the parts of us he will love. He does not treat us like a buffet of traits saying: “Love it. Love it. Like it. Eww. Yuck. Oooh! Whoa, barf!” If God loved this way none of us would ever feel a whole and true love—an absence of which creates a feeling of isolation and dejection. But God does not love us in spite of our differences—choosing to ignore our unique qualities. God loves us in totally whole and perfect form as inhabitants and caretakers of paradise.

Now, if you still aren’t buying into the fact that this world is God’s paradise, maybe you can agree that God has created for me a beautiful and able body equipped to take on this world, to meet its challenges, and to weather its elements. I will venture to say that you all look at me today and see a young, strong, healthy woman who is destined to take on the next new challenge. But for those of you who really know me, you know this has not always been true. I know something about self-inflicted wounds and the damage that can be done when we seek to exercise power and control, when we seek to hide the undesirable, and when we sacrifice the long term health of our loving relationships in favor of short term results.

The summer after my sophomore year of college, I began to face a very hard truth. There had been hints, like little puzzle pieces, which had floated in and out of my mind and heart my

entire life. Up until that point, I had been successful in storing away each individual piece in its own little box. But that summer, my subconscious decided to do some cleaning and those little boxes were opened and consolidated into a single disturbing image. By the end of my first semester of my junior year, the picture was clear: I was, am, and had always been, a lesbian.

I was ashamed, and if I am quite honest, there are still many moments when I am still ashamed of this, even though I know that it is simply the way God made me. It is the way that God made me love. But for me, the constant people-pleaser, the woman who puts absolutely everyone else's needs and desires before her own, this realization seemed selfish and disappointing. What would my parents think? What would happen to my mom's vision of my wedding? What would happen to Dad's beaming pride in me? What would my roommate think when she found out that she'd been living for three years with a queer? And most of all, what would all of those faceless people in the crowd think? What did I think? Why did I have to be different? Why did I have to let everyone down?

These questions ate away at me. In time, I would find that the resulting shame I felt actually made me the person who reacted most unfavorably to my coming out. It was almost two months after my first date with my first girlfriend that I came out to my parents. It was a very anxious moment for me. I felt absolutely terrible, as if I had suddenly become a different person to them. Instead of being their pride and joy, in my mind I had made myself out to be their greatest disappointment. I was the only one of the three of us who cried during that conversation. But my sobs were not the beginning and end of the ways in which the confession was eating at my spirit. No, that shame had begun to whittle me away that past summer and persisted even after my parents dried my tears.

When I was a young girl, I can recall punishing myself—putting myself in time out or taking privileges away from myself – when I felt I had done something wrong. If only I had simply taken away my TV or computer in exchange for coming out. But, I could not control the shame I felt. I felt like an immense failure. And though I was very much in love with my girlfriend at the time, I couldn't get past the nagging feeling that by being in that relationship, by enjoying it, by struggling through the hard times, learning, and building up that love, I was letting everyone else down. I felt I had become dirty to some. They didn't understand. To them, I was wrong. I was a sinner in their eyes. I could feel them watching me. Judging. Snickering. I felt so much weight on my heart. I felt so much guilt. I felt so much shame. I couldn't control all of this, so instead, I began to control my body and closing myself off to the paradise that God had shared with me.

A little over a year ago now, I weighed about 85 pounds and was admitted to an in-patient treatment program for anorexia nervosa. In my search to control what others thought of me, to win their approval, to win my own approval, I had stripped myself down to a weight that was barely sustaining my life. As my doctor said at the time, I had “one foot in the grave.” For a year and a half, I had attempted to commit a slow, suffocating suicide. I did not feel deserving of anything, not even food. And certainly not love or paradise. Anorexia not only attacks the mind and body, but it also strains the emotions, destroys relationships, and deflates spirituality. I isolated my friends, I alienated and eventually lost my girlfriend, and I broke my parents' hearts. In the depths of the disease, I walled off all of the beauty in my life, thinking that someone like me only deserved the very least. I was determined to make myself small and to be alone. That was the only way anyone would be safe. That was the only way I wouldn't let anyone down. I

would have to deny myself the healthy, vibrant body that God had created for me. I would have to deny myself paradise by erecting walls all around me.

Since I was released from treatment in Spring 2005, I have had a long road of recovery. I have faced many challenges, and they say that these obstacles will never truly end. The eating disorder will never go away completely. The trick is to live moment by moment and day by day and challenge myself to remain healthy and live in right relationship with my body. Because anorexia is such an isolating disease, one of the best ways to remain healthy is to keep in direct contact and interaction with others; to, in effect, tear down my walls. And when I took the teaching job at Kewanee and faced the prospect of returning to Princeton, I must admit that my hopes for sustaining such connections were low.

My years away from this town had soured me on it. And prejudiciously, I believed that no one here would accept me for who I was anymore. In effect, I mirrored the judgmental personality I saw in this community by believing that no one would understand me once word got around. The rumors would spin and grow. I saw myself as a prisoner—locked away in a cell because of the rejection I expected to find here. I would be alone again. Isolated. This made recovery look pretty bleak. But I had come too far in those months after treatment to backslide, so I decided to be proactive and contacted Curran. That's all it took. She sat down with me as soon as she was able and patiently listened to my story and what I needed in a church community. She invited me into your Open Prairie family, and you all accepted me from the start. You helped to break down my walls and accepted me back into God's loving paradise.

You know, it's funny. After distancing myself from the Catholic Church at the end of high school, I was resolved never to return to an organized denomination, much less a local church. I still believed in God as a creating and life-sustaining spirit, and I saw Jesus as a

historical figure who set a good example for how to treat others. All of the “son of God,” “prophet,” and “messiah” stuff seemed pretty farfetched to me. Curran assured me that such beliefs did not exclude me from joining in worship, and before I knew it, I was back in church, learning, being challenged, and enjoying the community.

Open Prairie has saved my health in the past year. The relationships I have developed in this community have helped to keep me healthy and connected. I fell in love with you all—with your progressive ideas, your spirit, and your commitment to pushing the envelope by reaching out and actively pursuing social justice, particularly for the “others” of society—people just like me. Most importantly you have shared with me the love of God. There are people in my life whom I love deeply who feel that they can only love me in spite of my homosexuality, and they therefore ignore it completely. This is a lonely feeling that has left me drained and rejected. However, many of you have accepted and loved the whole me. As a result of this you have empowered and energized me. This is a quality that makes this congregation so special.

Now, some of you tuned me out awhile ago thinking: “Oh, here we go again. Another ‘woman thing.’ Another ‘gay thing.’” But, believe it or not, these “woman things,” “gay things,” “handicapped things,” “environmental things,” and “immigration things” are not going away. Each time we deny their existence, fail to talk about them, ignore them, we hurt the body of our church and the paradise of the world outside our doors. By failing to take action, by stagnating, by forgetting our mission and losing it to the day-to-day struggles that we all encounter, we are walling off paradise. We are wounding ourselves.

So, as I leave you, I want to challenge you to continue moving forward. We cannot afford to sit back and stagnate in our mission simply because we are the most progressive Christians in town. Let’s face it, folks, that mission wasn’t too difficult to achieve. If we are

truly committed to God's love and reaching out to others, as you all have reached out to me, we must continue asking questions, challenging, and opening our hearts to others. I have seen firsthand the power that this congregation has when it moves past simple toleration and welcoming of the marginalized to truly honoring who they are as individuals and friends.

I am confident that I have talents, intelligence, and gifts that will allow me to offer a great deal to the world. But don't think that I will offer all of these things and become successful *in spite of* the fact that I am queer. Know that these gifts will only be enhanced by my sexuality and the fact that I can be honest about who I am. This honesty and peace with myself results in an authenticity that will help to tear down the walls that I have erected and allow me to share genuine love with others. Just as I have begun to learn to love myself and enjoy the richness of the world God created, Open Prairie must continue to grow in its appreciation of its entire membership.

By recognizing, respecting, and honoring the unique qualities of others, we as an Open Prairie family will learn much and make lasting relationships that will reveal the beauty and paradise that God created for us in the beginning. The "others" of society will not flock to Open Prairie seeking our pity or conditional acceptance. They will seek a love that will tear down walls to reveal the beauty inside themselves, in their relationships, and in the world. All of this cannot be achieved by remaining stationary. Just as we cannot expect to make money unless we invest, we as a congregation cannot expect progress toward our goals without investing the time and energy it takes to share ideas, feelings, and God's love. We must push ourselves to be in community with each other regularly in worship, in committees, and in prayer. We must reach out to the elders and youth of our congregation, recognizing that we all have unique talents to offer the congregation, regardless of age or any other "otherness." We must continue to ask

questions, challenge each other, and share our passions. These active steps will encourage the growth of God's love and acceptance. And when we share this love, we will no longer be rendered blind to the paradise God has created for us. We will instead become its beloved caretakers, patiently tending to its healthy development and ever-increasing prosperity.