

Emily Sutphin || Spiritual Autobiography

“For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD.” Jeremiah 29:11

My twin sister and I were born in Charlottesville, Virginia, to parents who loved Jesus and the church. I was baptized in a Methodist congregation when I was three years old but soon moved to Christiansburg, Virginia, where my family and I began attending a PCUSA church, Christiansburg Presbyterian Church, CPC. My parents chose CPC because it was the church my mother grew up in and because of the church’s warm, welcoming atmosphere. My parents believed it was important for my sister and me to become involved in the church at an early age so that we would be raised by the church community and mature to be disciples of Christ. Growing up, I attended weekly Sunday school and youth group meetings, and I participated in the choir and bell choir. CPC became a second home to me, where I felt safe to play, learn, and grow.

When I was nine years old, my father, a police officer, was killed in the line of duty, and CPC’s congregation was a vital support system amid my grief. My pastor provided care and guidance as my family navigated planning the funeral. Meanwhile, congregation members brought casseroles and offered to assist with childcare and household chores. My father’s death was the first time I began to question and even doubt my faith. I wondered about the goodness of a God that would allow my father to die and the existence of a Heaven. CPC provided a space of love and compassion where I could ask questions. I am grateful that my church did not seek to give me concrete answers but encouraged my spiritual exploration. At the time, I lacked the maturity and language to answer them satisfactorily, but I kept my spiritual questions close, treasuring and pondering them in my heart.

“Choose this day whom you will serve [...] as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” Joshua 24:15

When I was thirteen, I had the opportunity to participate in CPC’s confirmation program. The confirmation program included being matched with an older congregation member to serve as a spiritual mentor as we explored what it means to profess the Christian faith together. My spiritual mentor had a significant impact on my faith development. She encouraged my spiritual curiosity, shared her experiences journeying with Christ, and taught me about what makes the PCUSA denomination unique. Confirmation was the first time I systematically studied other Christian denominations and examined how my personal faith aligned with formal church doctrine. Additionally, confirmation prompted me to reexamine my childhood spiritual questions surrounding my father’s death and my understanding of salvation and Heaven. My spiritual mentor introduced me to an infinitely loving and merciful God whom I desired to know more and more about. After confirmation, I reaffirmed my faith as a Christian because I felt that the Christian faith best resonated with my beliefs about God. Additionally, I chose to join CPC, a Presbyterian church, because I developed a great appreciation of the denomination, especially regarding the PCUSA’s willingness to advocate alongside the marginalized and oppressed.

“Do not say, ‘I am only a boy,’ for you shall go to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.” Isaiah 1:7

I first felt God calling me to ministry within the Church in high school. It was in high school that I discovered that my understanding of Christian faith – belief in God who loves us radically and unconditionally – was unique, and I wanted to share that gospel message with the world, especially with those who had encountered harmful Christian theologies. Upon graduating high school, I attended college – first at Roanoke College and then at Virginia Tech – to study religion. One of my first classes in college was Introduction to the New Testament, where I fell in love with systematically studying Scripture. Throughout college, I strove to discern the type of ministry God was calling me to, social justice or ordained ministry as a minister of Word and Sacrament. To assist in my discernment process, I sought out a variety of internships: a pastoral internship at a church, an internship with a refugee resettlement partnership, and an international policy internship with the Presbyterian Office of Public Witness. From these internships, I realized that I have a passion for and the spiritual gift of relationship building. Relationship building is at the core of my understanding of Christian life. I believe that God actively invites us to be in relationship with God on earth and in Heaven and sends us forth to be in relationship with others.

*“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them [...] and teaching them.”
Matthew 28:19-20*

My college mentor and academic advisor encouraged me to apply to seminary to further my education and explore the many different vocational opportunities within church ministry. I applied to Princeton Theological Seminary (PTS) because of its reputation for academic rigor and emphasis on creating a covenant community among the students. Throughout seminary, I have sought to take classes that would expand my theological imagination and pastoral skills. I have wrestled with the relationship between God’s justice and God’s mercy, pondered the ultimate goals of Christian education, and become more aware of the interconnectedness of all of God’s creation. Outside of class, I have enjoyed singing in the choir, serving as a deacon (resident assistant) to PTS’ residential community, playing the tuba in the community band, and learning to paint. While at PTS, I have taken advantage of many field education opportunities working in a church, medical hospital, psychiatric hospital, and food pantry. Through field education, I discovered that while I am skilled at providing care during a crisis, I feel called to longer-term pastoral care relationships where I am invited to journey alongside someone for a time as we pursue God together. Additionally, I have realized that my passion for social justice and advocacy cannot be separated from my faith. I feel God calling me to seek justice and defend the oppressed from within and beside the Church.

The next chapter in my spiritual autobiography is yet to be written. I know that I am called to ministry as an ordained Minister of the Word and Sacrament within the PCUSA. I am seeking a congregation willing to journey with me, trying new things, risking failure, doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God.