

- I. When I was a kid, **I never dreamed of an ordination.** I never imagined becoming a pastor. Seeing how grumpy many of the clergy people I knew growing up seemed - put that pretty low on the list. No, as a kid, dreaming of what might be in my future, I saw myself on stage at an awards show, gratefully accepting the accolades of fans and critics. I imagined an Oscar. Or a Tony. Or maybe a Grammy. I saw myself at a curtain call on Broadway... And then I grew up. And had an encounter with something supernatural. I sensed the universe calling to me in a unique way. And my dreams began to change.
- A. Last Sunday I was part of something I never would have predicted as a young person. **I was ordained by a community of faith that five years ago didn't exist.** I was ordained and commissioned to live out my call to ministry here, in this place we're calling Haven.
- B. It was a powerful morning that came at the end of a powerful weekend. Powerful in ways that are hard to describe. Honestly, I've been struggling to make meaning of it and discern what to say to you in this context all week. Late in the week, our friend Ginny, who I've come to trust as a woman of great spiritual wisdom and insight, suggested that **perhaps rather than delivering a formal sermon this week, I might write you a pastoral letter.**
- C. In ancient times, the leaders of the early movement organized around the risen Jesus, communicated not only through sermons but through written correspondence, through pastoral letters, more formally known as epistles. This is what makes up a good chunk of our New Testament. This is what we have from Peter, one of Jesus' closest friends and one of the leaders of the movement after his death and resurrection. It's what we have from Paul, as well, who founded many faith communities in the early days. We have pastoral letters. Letters from church leaders or founders to a community they have helped gather.
- D. I had been ordained once before, just over five years ago in Iowa City, as I was preparing to come here and begin the project of bringing a new community of faith to life. You could say I've always been the pastor acknowledged and commissioned for this work. **And yet last week, Haven, in a sense, formalized our relationship.** Y'all put a ring on it. Our community said "we are now the ones holding your ordination". We acknowledge you as called by God to this work here with us. And I responded by renewing my ordination vows unto this particular community that has gathered in the last five years.
- E. So perhaps Ginny is right. **This is the moment, in the wake of us officially defining our relationships status, for me to get real pastoral and write you a letter.** That's what I'm going to read you today.

My dear Haven Berkeley Faith Community,

I write to you with a full heart and a hopeful one as I ponder the time we spent together last weekend, and what transpired in our midst. **I write to all of you who are gathered to receive these words.** Some of you have been a part of this Haven project for a very long time. Others have come more recently; perhaps this is even your first day encountering the Haven community. Some of you gathered with us last weekend for some or all of our time together. Others were not present, and yet I sincerely believe that whatever gifts were given to the forty or so there in St. Dorothy's Rest were not for those alone, but that they are to be shared among all of us, and I speak these words in faith that the God who was gracious enough to share God's care for us with us last weekend, wants to share that same care with those who could not be present.

There have been many significant moments in these last five years that Haven has been coming into existence. I think of that first night that nine of us and a few kids gathered in my living room. We were

all new to each other, we were all new to the Bay Area, and yet we were gathered with hope that at some point, something like this might exist. I think of the night we chose a name, “Haven” that this community would be known by. I think of our first service outside my home. Of the season we came alive to a vision of holding three shared values in tension: being safe, diverse, and Jesus-centered. I think of our eyes being opened as we began to smash problematic idols. And I think of all the significant comings and goings that have taken place through the years. People who’ve arrived and some have stayed and become deep in the work of creating Haven. Others have only been here a time, but many of their contributions remain.

And yet through these five years, **it has not always been clear that there was a through line**; that what was happening week to week was connected to a bigger project. Were we just people showing up on Sundays because we had no better place to go and we couldn’t quite let go of the itch? Or was God forming something real in the midst of our gathering? Something that needed to exist? And if so, what was that something?

Five years ago, I don’t think I even fully understood the project I’d embarked on. I knew I was supposed to come here. I’d been on 13 year journey of saying “yes” to what it felt like Jesus was inviting me into through too many important supernatural exchanges, as well as mundane confirmations, for me to ignore.

It was almost 20 years ago, in 2001, when I was a young woman, engaged to be married, that I first felt like I had a divine moment in which I sensed the Spirit whisper something important and direct to me. “Someday you guys are going to start a church. Don’t tell Jason.” Many of you know the story. I sensed I shouldn’t tell Jason, in part, because at the time I clearly misunderstood what this word from God might be about. I thought Jason, the son of a pastor, was going to be called to be a pastor himself, and I’d be stuck being a “stupid pastor’s wife”.

Five years later, I finally figured out that the word was never about his leadership, it was about mine. But there were other misconceptions I had too. I assumed the church we’d start would be a part of the denomination I was in, a denomination that would ultimately expel me when it became clear that the community I intended to begin would be fully LGBTQ inclusive. But even beyond that, my whole understanding of what this church-starting project was about was rooted in a religious culture that, in retrospect, was hubristic, you could even say colonialist, believing at least subconsciously, if not stating directly, that we really had the one true vision of what it meant to follow God and we were compelled to start communities that shared this vision with others who didn’t have access to it. We need to go plant our flag in cities and continents around the world so God would be present. I don’t believe that anymore.

Recently I found myself reflecting with Jason about this evolution of understanding what it is we’re doing here with Haven. “What if this whole church starting journey was never about all the things we thought it was back when we started?” What if I went to seminary, we moved from Chicago to Iowa, and eventually left the midwest for the Bay Area for totally different ends than we originally understood? What if this whole two-decades journey was simply a divine invitation we were following because God knew **that someday we were going to need to build ourselves a new spiritual home for the journey we were going to take in the future?** It’s as if the Divine sensed that the home we had at present couldn’t contain where we were going on our own spiritual quests. We were going to need a new home, a different kind of home, a safe, diverse, Jesus-centered home here in Berkeley, California, for ourselves and for others who needed a new spiritual home, too.

This past weekend it became clear to me the importance of that spiritual home not just for myself or for my family, but for all who are coming into this Haven project. **This fall our series of conversations is called “The Home We’re Building Together”, and I think the most important word there is “together”.** For perhaps the most powerful part of our weekend was the revelation in so many small as well as more significant moments, that this call to home-building was never just a personal call, it has always been a collective one. If we are building a spiritual home together, my own story, my own call, my own unique journey that has brought me here to be your pastor: all of those are simply part of the frame for the foundation God is laying. I believe Jesus has been filling the foundation up and all of you are part of what has been laid down. All of you are part of what’s being built.

As I’ve been thinking about this this week, I’ve been considering how we are not the first to feel the call to “build” a spiritual home. Long ago, the Apostle Paul used the same metaphor for the work he was doing. In his day, he saw folks begin to focus on the various personalities involved in the work of fostering spiritual community. Some responded to Paul’s leadership. Others connected with another leader, Apollos. But Paul was reminding them that what they were a part of was bigger than any one of them.

Paul says it this way in 1 Corinthians 3: ***“Who do you think Paul is, anyway? Or Apollos, for that matter? Servants, both of us—servants who waited on you as you gradually learned to entrust your lives to our mutual Master. We each carried out our servant assignment...You are God’s house. Using the gift God gave me as a good architect, I designed blueprints; Apollos is putting up the walls. Let each carpenter who comes on the job take care to build on the foundation! Remember, there is only one foundation, the one already laid: Jesus Christ.”***

When Paul wrote these words to the church in Corinth, he wrote them to redirect their attention from the individuals who were called and gifted to lead them to the bigger project they were all being invited into. It’s not that the work of the leaders didn’t matter, but it had to be kept in perspective. Ultimately all of this labor was in service to something God was doing, built on a foundation of Jesus.

This was one of the most beautiful revelations to me this past weekend. Through our time together, I sensed how much more God might have in store for us if we could open our eyes to the treasure gathered in our midst, recognizing that the Spirit is building something here that is far beyond any of our individual contributions. One of the ways this was illustrated most beautifully was in our time of community brainstorming. I suggested that perhaps thus far we’ve been building the foundation, and now perhaps we’re being invited to creatively imagine with God’s Spirit what this home might look like, a chance to collectively craft the blueprints. It was our own version of what our guest speaker, Pastor Adey Wassink, called “prophetic fantasizing”.

Honestly, when I invited you into the exercise, Haven, I had no idea what to expect the outcome would be. We started with a picture of an empty house. We were each invited to take some time to listen to the Holy Spirit and consider what we might fill that house with. How would we describe the foundation of Haven? What have we seen built thus far? How might we name what we believe needs to be built going forward? Each of us took some time to listen and were then invited to share our ideas by putting them on the house.

I myself took a walk during this time. I asked Jesus what I was meant to receive; what I believed was needed in this home that is being built. One of the words I thought I sensed most clearly was “trust”. I had a sense that that had more than one meaning. It certainly meant that we needed to create a space that felt safe for relational trust to be built between folks; that people felt that they could open themselves up to be known and trust that others would receive them with authentic care.

But I also felt like there was another layer of trust that God was inviting us into - or at least *me* into: to trust that this community can hear from the Divine, and be used to speak God’s wisdom to one another. To trust that Jesus could be present in our midst and revealed through one another’s gifts. For me, this meant letting go of the pressure I can feel as a pastor to always be the one on the scent of the Spirit, directing which way we are to go. It meant trusting that others had important words for us all to hear, and that what was needed in this season was space for those words to be spoken.

And then I came inside, and saw with my own eyes the ways that your capacity to hear from God was being embodied in the present. My own call to trust you was validated as I came in the room and saw a wondrous picture emerging. Our empty house had been filled with dreams for the future. Dreams for the ways we’d move more deeply into relationship with one another, finding the comfort and solace that home is meant to offer. Dreams of the partnerships we’d forge with our neighbors and the way we’d bless the community around us. Dreams of more marginalized voices preaching, leading worship, and shaping our community at every level. Dreams for our kids and youth - that they too would have a spiritual home to nurture their own growth, and connection with adults that can care for them as they evolve. Dreams for a healing center, for a worship collective, for places where creativity flows and new music and art that reflect a more expansive view of the divine are birthed. Dreams for our own building to live this out in, and even dreams that the building would have a train station and a heliport. (As our own Connie said after observing it - Haven’s not building a house, we’re building a resort.) Seeing this house now filled with ideas brought tears to my eyes to behold, knowing each colorful note represented a word of hope or faith or longing for what this spiritual home might become. My own focus turned from my personal building projects to behold the bigger home that was being revealed in our midst.

As we read through each contribution to our dream-house, I saw the common dreams that were being cultivated, the common building blocks that were being set side by side. I also saw words I never could have imagined, but that seemed to speak on behalf of the divine. I felt a sense of awe for what was being co-created. After all this time, after all this foundational labor, now something special is being formed that was beyond any of us, but all of us are a part of it.

I find it interesting that Paul spoke to his community about them being built on the foundation of Jesus Christ. What does that mean? It’s easy to jump I think to preachy, simplistic answers - answers about belief or dogma. But when I look at the picture that Haven has crafted, and I look at what you who were gathered discerned Haven is built on, the foundation that has been laid thus far, I think I understand more deeply what Paul was getting at.

Here are just some of the things that you wrote are the foundation that has been established to this point at Haven: *“Safe space...Freedom to be vulnerable....A vision for inclusion and a healing space for those who have been hurt....Room for mystery and Spirit encounters....A connection to the wisdom of our ancestors....Prayer warriors...Curiosity and wondering...Valuing a diversity of ages, abilities, races, genders, and sexual orientations...Consistent service to the community through our*

*partnership with the Berkeley Food and Housing Project...A community committed to putting the marginal at the center."*

What does it mean to build on the foundation of Jesus? Friends, I think it means all of these things. Jesus, is the one who made people safe that were unsafe everywhere else. Jesus included and healed. Jesus pursued mystery and powerful spiritual encounter, but rooted it in ancient wisdom. Jesus prayed and saw things change. Jesus made the last first and the first last, bringing those at the margins to the center. This is the foundation that Jesus has been laying and all of us, whether here for years or hours are simply workers in the project.

In the weeks to come, we'll no doubt have more conversations around what this community is creatively discerning its identity to be. We'll talk more about the common themes that have emerged that you have named you see in this home we're building. We'll talk about what each of us might have to contribute to the building. In future weeks we'll invite others to add their own ideas and words, so the dream can continue to gain definition as more builders become part of it.

As we do that work of carrying this home-building project forward, I think Paul's words hold additional wisdom for us. Going on in his pastoral letter to the church in Corinth, he says, ***"Take particular care in picking out your building materials. Eventually there is going to be an inspection. If you use cheap or inferior materials, you'll be found out. The inspection will be thorough and rigorous. You won't get by with a thing. If your work passes inspection, fine; if it doesn't, your part of the building will be torn out and started over. But you won't be torn out; you'll survive—but just barely."***

There is wisdom here for all of us. I believe it is true that a solid foundation has been laid over the last five years and in this season we are entering a new phase of home-building. All of us are invited to take up our tools and become craftspeople. But as we do so, we want to be wise about our building. We want to be thoughtful and prayerful about how we build, making smart choices about the structure we create to support the fantasies that we want to come to life. We need sound materials that can weather storms. Not because any of us will be thrown off the job site if we make a poor choice, but because it's tragic to see your creation destroyed. It's costly financially, personally, relationally, emotionally. And friends, look at the world we're living in. Look at the days this home is being built in. We're foolish to believe there won't be storms or earthquakes coming our way. So what happens to us when they do.

When we had our community discernment time last weekend, there was something besides "trust" that I felt like I received. The other word I discerned was actually two words linked together: "stability and flexibility". This seems to me along the lines of what Paul was calling his followers into. We need to build structures that are stable; that are well constructed and can endure the challenging circumstances that are coming. But we don't want structures that can't evolve. We want a home that's adaptable not only for what we need today, but for the journey we are taking, along with our children and those who need this home that we have not yet met. So as we build, let's do it in a way that will out last any one of us, that this home will be present for others to inhabit and build upon.

There's one last quote from Paul's pastoral letter that feels relevant to me for this moment we are in Haven, of building a spiritual home together.

***“You realize, don’t you, that you are the temple of God, and God himself is present in you? No one will get by with vandalizing God’s temple, you can be sure of that. God’s temple is sacred –and you, remember, are the temple.”***

When I hear these words, I think Paul was trying to remind his listeners that ultimately this project they were engaging in was not just another time filler. It was not just another way to spend their Sundays. It wasn’t just a chance to sing songs they liked or share good meals with nice people. There was something sacred in their gathering. God’s own presence was in the work. This is a word of hope, that they could trust that ultimately they were giving themselves to something of significance that couldn’t be easily corrupted, for it wasn’t really their work at all. It was the work of the Divine, present in the midst that made the whole thing meaningful and worthwhile. This is a word of hope to us, as well.

I no longer believe that we have exclusive rights to the Divine presence; that God follows our flag-planting. The validation of God’s presence in our midst is nothing we’re entitled to for answering the questions right. IN the same way, God showing up in our work doesn’t mean God’s not present elsewhere. But it is meaningful when we experience the sacred in our midst.

The truth is many of our stories have been formed through loss. If God knew long ago that someday I was going to need a new spiritual home, it’s because God also know that the place I called home at the time would at some point fail me. It would no longer welcome me if I thought differently, felt convicted differently, heard from the Divine in ways that this home could not affirm and understand.

I know my story is not the only one like this. Many of you have come here because the home you thought you had has failed you too. It failed you when you came out as Queer or Trans. It failed you when your child came out and you dared affirm them. It failed you when your marriage fell apart. It failed you because it was built on a foundation of white supremacy. It failed you because you dared question why the home was built the way it was. It failed your need to evolve. Or maybe your home itself simply had to be torn down and you were left homeless.

But if the Jesus story tells us anything compelling, to me one of the most compelling pieces it demonstrates is a Divine commitment to resurrection, to life after death. This is ultimately why I believe God will always be present in the places of new life in the wake of loss. When the exiles aren’t destroyed as they are left without a home, but instead they find each other and build a new home for themselves, a home that can provide a safe Haven for other exiles as well as make space for folks who simply want to live in a more expansive place, that is something magical to behold. It is what some people might call Holy.

I’ve now had two ordinations as a pastor. The first took place five years ago in Iowa City, as Adey and her church blessed me and commissioned me to come to Berkeley. And while it was a meaningful moment, it felt altogether different than the ordination that took place last weekend. Last weekend’s ordination was deeply emotional. I expected myself to be moved by your words, your stories, your charges to me, but I was not prepared for all of us to be moved together. I hoped that God would be with us, but I wasn’t prepared for that sense of Spiritual Potency, as if the very air was humid with divine blessing and care.

I spoke with Adey this week, and she felt the same way. We considered together what about the experience of these two ordinations was different, even though the same vows were taken, the same

structure was observed, even some of the same songs were sung. Yet they felt completely different emotionally. As we considered why that might be, she said something that felt very true. Adey identified that this felt more powerful because it was about more than me and my call to ministry. It was about Haven. As she put it, "It was like your whole church was being ordained."

Haven, I believe for some sacred reason that is too broad and beautiful for me to fully comprehend, all of our stories have intersected here. All of us have been called into the sacred work of building something special. I don't yet know all that that will mean practically and logistically. Those concrete details will emerge in time. But I end sharing this hope: that my ordination is your ordination. My call is your call. I was given a number of charges last week, and I share them with you. The call I was given to remain authentic and real is your call. The charge I received to tenderheartedness is your charge. The call to courage and boldness is your call. The charge to center the voices of the marginalized, I charge you with this, too. The call to trust the power of the Spirit among us in the voices of this community, I give you that same call. May this not be about any single builder, but may all of us live into love for the one who is ultimately building among us, and love for all the neighbors who will find shelter in this sacred Haven. Amen.

Now I offer this letter to you with my whole heart. I am so honored and humbled to be your pastor. There is nothing I would rather give myself to. I am utterly filled with affection for who you are, Haven, and what you have given me over the last five years, and I look with hope and joy at the years ahead for what all of us will become.

Gratefully, your pastor, Leah