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Good morning, my name is Pam Brubaker. I started to attend CMCL last summer and I have met with Susan a few times and shared my story of how I became a Jesus follower, I believe sharing our story is important, so trusting in that, I am here today to share my story.

To understand my story, it might help if I share some things about my background and childhood. The first thing that I would like to share is that my mom has a pretty severe case of bi-polar disorder. That meant that she often acted in ways that were confusing, destructive, and psychotic, very removed from reality. No one in my family really had any understanding at the time of what was happening or how to deal with this. Another huge factor for me was sexual abuse by another family member. My earliest memory is of being sexually abused and that continued for many years. As I prepared to share today, I knew that it was important for me not to share extensively about those details but enough to help you understand why my childhood was so painful and dark.

Emotional pain was very normal, it was an almost constant companion. In my childhood memories, the outliers, the things that stood out, were the moments that felt calm, peaceful, joyful. To me, the world was a bad and unsafe place. Not surprisingly, I acted in ways that were really damaging and destructive to both myself and others. And I believed so deeply that I was bad. In the house that I now live in, there is a pump that pumps the water from the washing machine up into the sewage line and there is a filter that has to be changed. As I changed it one day I realized that moldy black gunk that I pulled from that filter was really close to how I imagined myself inside. Like all kids, I found coping strategies and a big one for me was emotional hiding, pushing everything inside down and pretending, putting up a false front.

As I look back, there were some people (one teacher, a therapist, my godfather) who were trying to reach out and help, but the thought of being real with anyone was incredibly scary. I knew that I was bad through and through and I knew that if I was real, they would see how bad I was. So I just simply put up a false front, a wall, and I lied, I pretended. Nobody got in.

Fast forward to me at 20, I found myself pregnant, my son's birth father was just as unhealthy as me, but the way this manifested for him was through violence and anger.

And this is the part of the story where my experience of God changes. I was raised going to church, and early on I had some sense of God, but my understanding was that God was for

the good people, and that wasn't me. By the time I was 15, I had really walked away from the whole idea of God. But on my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, my son was born. As I held him for the first time, I remember this sense of God. If I had to sum it up, I felt like "God is. There is a God. God exists." And there was a sense of goodness in it. And something started to change in me. By the time that my son was a year old, it was pretty clear that if I stayed with his birth father, that physical abuse would be part of our lives, and I became determined to give my son something different, so I left his birth father. This sounds really good, but in reality it was desperate and scary. But these pieces came together and gave me what I needed to start to seek God in an intentional way.

I felt much like the prodigal son from Luke 15. If I could form my thoughts, it would have been something like "God, please just let me in. I don't care, I will scrub the toilets, I know I don't really belong here". I was desperate for change. I started to attend a church and delved into the New Testament and in particular the stories of Jesus, the gospels. And it was then that I started to experience Jesus in particular. There was this very new experience for me of being seen and known, and accepted and loved. My sense was Jesus seeing behind the façade, seeing all the ugliness and loving me anyway.

I would borrow sets of sermons on cassette tape from my sister's church. I remember a sermon where the speaker invited the listeners to imagine themselves dancing with Jesus and him saying *I am crazy about you*. I pulled over and sobbed. I can still hear Jesus saying this, it feels like a memory.

The story from John 8 of the woman caught in adultery became so real to me. I lived it over and over again and as I read it, I was that woman. Jesus looked me in the eyes, exposed in all my shame and disgusting-ness and said *I do not condemn you. You are seen and known and accepted and loved*. These experiences are still so real to me, so undeniable. Something else happened which was surprising, which I did not expect, certain things in me started to heal. Really ugly places that I did not think were changeable started changing. And other places that I saw as so bad and ugly, Jesus was saying *you always thought this was ugly and it is not*.

So I threw myself into the place where people talked about Jesus the most: church. And I have to say, I have received so many gifts, so much blessing, and have so many deep friendships, as you would expect. But along the way, I seemed to continue to bump into things in the church that were so different than my experiences of God, that do not look like Jesus, and that has been one of the hardest things in my Christian journey.

Honestly, as I prepared for today, I really struggled with this section of the message. I would type a paragraph, then delete. Type, delete. I don't know how to talk about this. I know it's tricky, and I don't want to do this lightly. I have more questions than answers.

But there are things here that need to be said. For me, the more deeply I got involved in church and especially the more I moved into leadership roles, certain things were unwelcome. In so much of the Christian culture I have experienced, there is so little room for questions, anger, messiness or doubts. This became paralyzing for me, because to this day, I continue to have plenty of doubt, messiness, anger and so on.

I love the story of Thomas, because he was willing to be real about his doubts. And I see Jesus accepting his doubts, *come and touch me, see my hands and my side*. I might be one of the people, we might be the people, that Jesus was talking about who get blessed who couldn't see Jesus. As much as I talk of my Jesus experiences, I have never seen him with my physical eyes or audibly heard him. But like Thomas, I come with all my doubts and brokenness and Jesus accepts me. But over and over again, I have subtly and not so subtly received a different message inside the church, "there is no place here for all that messiness". And it seems to me that without space where we can be messy, what hope do we have for changing it? Or understanding it? Then we can't look at the problems that are present, things like sexism, racism, shaming, patriarchy, all things which are not just present, but sometimes systemic in our Christian institution.

I am left with a lot of struggle here, not knowing what to do with all this, I have more questions than answers. But there are some things I do want to share:

In my opinion, it is really important that we have room in our churches for doubt and brokenness and anger and questions. And this church feels like one of those places for me, and for that, I am so grateful. I have had this sense that something good inside me has been shrinking and suffocating for a long time, because these things are taboo to talk about, but that part of me is growing again, and it has everything to do with this church and the fact that there is space here, so thank you.

A second thought, Some things need to be said. There is great healing for me in being allowed to say this. In a church! We need to be allowed to speak of the dysfunction of the church, that needs to be OK, and not taboo.

Third thing: How we speak about the dysfunction matters, my attitude matters. I know that I cannot stand up on some soap box and point a condemning finger at other people or groups of people. The more I am willing to look at the dysfunction of the church, the more I find pieces of it within myself. And if I can look at it, there is hope for change. I end up back where I started a few decades ago, remembering Jesus saying "*I do not condemn you*"

and I know again that my job is to speak what I see and understand, but with humility and love, knowing that I am truly not better than anyone else.

Last thing, I realize that there is in me, a resistant to doing what I just did. In Christian rhetoric, I just shared my testimony about how Jesus saved me, and there is resistance in me to doing that, because I have seen that done too often with manipulation and line drawing of who is in and who is out, shaming and fear, and with inflated egos, and it is good to be resistant to those things. But I don't want that to stop me from talking about my experience of Jesus. Jesus offered me so much compassion and grace and hope for healing and change. That seems like a good place to end, to hold that out to the Christian church, to the world and to every person, as I hold it for myself. Amen.

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