

introduction

This is our story.

To tell the story properly we start in the middle of everything. We could start “In the beginning,” when the universe burst into life or even a century ago in Wichita, Kansas when this church came into being; but instead we begin here and now, with all who would joyfully dare to claim this congregation as their own, the community we call College Hill United Methodist Church.

Our story is one of laughter and tears, of struggle and growth, of beauty and goodness and heartache woven together. To tell our story is to celebrate who we are and who we are becoming. To tell our story is no less than the sharing of our lives...



part one:
faith



chapter 1

the One who is

Somehow in the midst of our very human lives, the Spirit of God got a hold of us. What a sacred mystery that the Being who breathes life into all things, the One we call Creator, has filled our hearts with the knowledge of love. In this community, we are quick to admit that we know so little of this One, "I Am," that we can in no way comprehend the fullness of the divine; and yet, in what we have experienced we know God as Beauty and Wisdom, and we trust our lives to the One who is faithful, generous, compassionate, and wholly good.

This One is Love.

And yet we cannot stop there. We have experienced Love's healing, we know Love's constant presence and power, and by Love we are completely known. While words fail us, we speak all the same, attempting to describe mystery: to us, God is spirit, truth, peace, and light; God is majestic, everlasting, and eternal; God is energy and process, grace and joy, transcendent and immanent, beyond gender; God is creative, paradoxical, and miraculous; God is relational and personal, patient, vulnerable, inclusive, accepting, and forgiving; God is liberator, shepherd, strength and shield, teacher, comforter, and beloved. And this God is the One, Love, who blesses us, sustains us, redeems us, and transforms our lives completely.

chapter 2

the One we follow

The Love we know calls out to us through the person of Jesus, the Christ whom we follow in the way of unconditional love for God, our neighbors, and for ourselves. Born as a Jew into the world of the first century Roman Empire, Jesus' spirituality flowed from his heritage. He was a teacher of wisdom, a prophet calling people to faith in God, and a healer.

Jesus preached that the kingdom of God's shalom was at hand. He proclaimed that through God's own power, it was immediately possible to receive the gift of *shalom*—*that is, to live in relationship with God and one another in the universe as God intended it to be*, to live in love, peace, wholeness, and delight.

Jesus challenged significant cultural norms to bring a new community of justice and love into existence and he invited all to become disciples after his own example. His compassion and care enveloped the marginalized, rejected, and abandoned; he showered love especially on the downtrodden and the poor.

In all ways, Jesus lived in complete commitment and surrender to nonviolent Love, even when this eventually led to his torture and death on a Roman cross. He was buried, left in the tomb, and through Love's power and mystery, he rose from the dead, and lives today.

The faith of Jesus is essential to our story. We trust him as the Christ, fully human, authentically empowered by the Spirit of God, and we know him as fully divine, empowering us to continue Love's work of forgiveness and reconciliation, healing, liberation, and peacemaking among all people.

chapter 3

Spirit in community

We are so grateful to have each other on this journey. We are incredibly blessed through this Spirit-led and Spirit-filled community and through the diversity of the church stretching across time and space, our brothers and sisters following in the way of Jesus throughout the centuries and across the planet. We recognize our diversity as beautiful and good. We pray for even greater diversity within our congregation.

When we gather, we come together to affirm the Spirit of God within us and among us, to live in peace as reconciled and forgiven people, and to shine the light of Love in all directions. Through our lives, we declare the good news of God's love for the entire world. This is nothing short of joy! We value all life and celebrate creation, pouring our love into healthy relationships, the pursuit of distributive justice, and active stewardship of the earth. We pray that the Spirit which dwells within us might empower us and use us as agents and instruments of the miraculous workings of the kingdom of God's shalom.

Still, it must be said that we often fall short of our dreams. We are human beings struggling to grow. We do not always love or love well. But we carry on in faith to worship and pray, welcome and serve, search and learn, rejoicing that the Spirit is transforming us, however slowly and sporadically it might seem at times.

chapter 4

to dare, to trust

Our story is not over yet. When the story is told well, there is a secret dear to our hearts that must be revealed, a precious gem that we will not and would not hide. The secret is this: as far as churches go,

we are unabashedly unafraid.



We are unafraid of the Bible. We are unafraid of history. We are unafraid of each other. We are unafraid of human sexuality. We are unafraid of other faith traditions, atheism, or agnosticism. We refuse to be afraid of however God may choose to be revealed in our world or to transform it. When you come among us, you really can sense that something amazing is going on:

**for all our differences,
we know what it means to trust ourselves to Love.
This is simply who we are.**

This is the faith we share.

interlude



commitment

Our faith is a wide-open faith, a soul confidence, a faith of all-encompassing grace and exhilarating freedom rising from our intimate communion with the Spirit of Love. We ourselves are not divine and yet we know the divine dwells within us.

We experience and describe this profound togetherness as **relationship.**

In the scriptures, these divine/human relationships are established and nurtured through God's promise: "I will be your God and you shall be my people." God promises unending love and commitment to all generations, to abide with humanity forever, never to leave or abandon us, and always to bless us.

From Abraham and Sarah, to Israel, and to us through the person of Jesus, these sacred promises have always required a human response to divine initiative. When that response is to promise trust and commitment in return, covenant is formed. Today, within this faith community, we celebrate our relationship with God and one another, affirming our commitment to the One who is unconditionally committed to us. We enter joyfully into covenant with God, together.

part two:
action



chapter 5

our practices... wise, bold, graceful

To continue our story then, we have spoken of our faith, but we must carry on to tell of our faith in action. Covenant changes everything. Not only does it unite us with God and one another in a dynamic community of relationships, it continually challenges us to ask and answer: What does it mean for us to follow in the way of Jesus as a people who love God, our neighbors, and ourselves in this culture and this congregation? How does our covenant with the God of love shape the way we live?

Within our church, we pray to embody grace beyond belief. All our actions are guided by a common purpose, a vision of living as a Christian community wise in the ways of the Spirit, bold in the ways of justice, and graceful in relationship with all creation. This vision becomes reality for us when we commit ourselves to particular practices, actions we consider essential for nurturing life together in covenant with God, here and now.

We outline the practices which enable us to live out our purpose within this congregation as follows:

- ❖ passionate engagement in worship
- ❖ regular prayer and/or meditation
- ❖ ongoing exploration of Scripture
- ❖ theological reflection
in a spirit of openness and generosity
- ❖ active participation in at least one small group
- ❖ generous sharing of our personal abundance
including time, effort, money, and materials
- ❖ dedication to work done with God's Spirit of Love
moving through us
- ❖ cultivation of peace and justice in all communities of
which we are a part: through hospitality, forgiveness,
reconciliation, compassion, and nonviolence

Empowered by God, we are willing to take risks personally and as a community on behalf of love.

chapter 6

Love's leading

We trust Love and we acknowledge that we have arrived at a point of decision. Just as a covenant relationship with the divine always requires human response, so too is a response necessary for affirming the covenant of this particular faith community. We share one story, and yet, there are some among us whom Love is prompting to dive into the heart of this congregation's vision for itself while there are others among us whom Love may be leading in different directions right now.

**We affirm the different ways that
Love is at work.**

We welcome all into the fullness of life among us, just as we invite all to consider making a covenant promise with our congregation.

chapter 7

a covenant for College Hill

This is the covenant we make.

Out of our trust in Love,
and from our desire that we might grow
in Love,
wisdom, boldness, and grace,
we commit ourselves to our practices
in the following ways...

passionate engagement in worship

In worship, we acknowledge and celebrate Love and joy in our midst and throughout all of creation. We listen attentively for God, respond to the Spirit with our entire selves, and express ourselves with freedom. We worship as individuals, yet we consider communal worship essential to our shared covenant, recognizing that we connect to the divine both individually and through our relationships with one another. *Because worship is so important to us, we commit ourselves to make weekly attendance a priority in our lives.*

regular prayer and/or meditation

Through prayer and meditation, our connection with the divine is intimately nurtured and we become persons whose spirits are attuned to perceive the movement of the Spirit. We listen for God and to God and we speak from our innermost hearts to God. We understand prayer and meditation to take a wide variety of forms and we give thanks that we can practice them at any time and in any place. We recognize that the spiritual disciplines work to transform us, and at the same time, prayer mysteriously and powerfully impacts the world in which we live. *Out of our complete dedication to Love, we give ourselves to an intentional practice of prayer and/or meditation.*

ongoing exploration of Scripture

As we engage Scripture through worship, prayer, study, and dialogue, we find help and inspiration for following in the way of Jesus. Scripture is the primary source of our shared faith story; and through Scripture, Love is revealed to us, inviting us to respond. Scripture guides us in our journeys, challenges us to grow, helps us find healing, and teaches us how to live in meaningful ways today. Reading Scripture, however, is no easy task: it requires patience, openness, humility, knowledge, critical thinking, skepticism at times, and a willingness to wrestle with complexity and contradictions. Scripture is to be read, experienced, and interpreted individually and together. *As we join in covenant, we embrace the search for the wisdom Scripture reveals within the continuing dialogue of the faith community.*

theological reflection
in a spirit of openness and generosity

We value all reflection and thinking about the Spirit of Love, humanity, and the universe. We express and share our thoughts and experiences with one another willingly and we listen to one another, seeking always to build relationships of honesty, safety, trust, and understanding. *As we devote ourselves to continuous learning, learning that envelopes the diversity of religious expression, belief, and agnosticism, we seek to extend welcome, respect, and care to all people in our lives and within this community.*



active participation in at least one small group

Our spirits grow in Love through the time we spend sharing our joys, our most heart-rending struggles, and our ordinary day-to-day experiences with one another. We believe these kinds of relationships are best facilitated through small groups. For the purposes of our covenant, we would identify a small group as any group within the church where we can know others and be deeply known, where we can find fellowship, enjoyment, encouragement, support, and experience a sense of accountability. *Through small groups we find a place to belong, a niche within the life of the community, and a place where we commit, together, to take responsibility for our spiritual lives.*

generous sharing of our personal abundance
including time, effort, money, and materials

We know the divine as One who Gives – whether life, love, or anything that sustains and enriches life. We give of ourselves because Love is expressed through giving, because it brings us joy to give, and because giving is a practical way that we live out our trust in God and practice stewardship of all that has been given to us. We recognize that communities cannot exist without resources and we rejoice that when we share with one another we are contributing to the Spirit's work through our congregation. *We commit ourselves in particular to practice intentional percentage giving, prayerfully considering and planning to share a percentage of our income with the church and the world.*

dedication to work done
with God's Spirit of Love moving through us

God grants each person unique gifts which are meant to be shared through service to one another and all creation. These gifts come in the form of talents, skills, abilities, and sometimes simply through the virtue of our presence. We celebrate that the Spirit of Love moves through us, blessing us and the world as we use our gifts through a sense of personal vocation. We recognize that vocation finds its expression in our workplaces as well as in and through our work in the church and community. *In response to Love's leading, we dedicate ourselves to service in the way of Christ, service that uniquely reflects our individual vocation.*

cultivation of peace and justice in all communities of which we are a part: through hospitality, forgiveness, reconciliation, compassion, and nonviolence

Because we live as those who pattern ourselves after Jesus, we follow a way of life that promotes human flourishing. We recognize that divine peace is much more than the absence of conflict; it is, rather, a vision of wholeness, healing, and shalom within and among all of creation. We pursue peace with all our brothers and sisters through the practice of hospitality, embracing others with grace just as they are; through a commitment to forgive and be reconciled with all people, including those we might name as enemies; and through unconditional surrender to compassion, which leads us to reject all forms of violence. Understanding that distributive justice is integral to the pursuit of peace, we will work to ensure that all people have access to the essential resources needed for life. *We commit ourselves to live peace and to seek justice for those within our congregation, our neighborhood, and beyond.*

empowered by God, we are willing to take risks personally and as a community on behalf of love

We view our willingness to take risks as a significant way we live out our ultimate trust in Love. *We are prepared to try new things, to struggle, and to challenge ourselves to pursue life boldly within God's kingdom of shalom.* We acknowledge the Spirit's life-giving power and the wonder of divine possibility, and we open ourselves to be used by God in miraculous ways.



This is the covenant that we make with God and one another within College Hill United Methodist Church. We shall make this covenant public, review and clarify this covenant regularly in worship, and renew our commitment to covenant on a yearly basis.

Thanks be to the God of Love!



epilogue

We share the story of our community with joy. It is a beautiful love story, a story of divine proportions and tiny glimpses of grace, no less magnificent than the greatest love story that was ever told. We are partial to it, at least, for these are our lives we are talking about.

And so, for a brief moment in time and space, we pause. In this juncture, as in the nanoseconds between the striking of a match and the advent of a flame, we pray.

*Love, we know you are not done with us yet.
Love, give us courage and hope as our story
with you continues to unfold.
Love, blaze in us and through us as we step
forward in faith, welcoming all people who
would desire to live together with us, in You.*

