

My name is Jennifer Brown Steinfurth. I was born and raised in The United Methodist Church. Some of you have known me for almost my whole life.

What you may not know is how deeply I love this church and what a struggle it has been to learn to love myself as much.

Before I could walk, I was walked down the aisle at Church of the Saviour as a newly baptized member of Christ's holy church.

My mom tells me that before I had spoken a full sentence, that I had memorized parts of my favorite UM hymns and would sing them with all my heart.

Before I ever fell in love, I fell into the love and grace of God.

Before anyone ever asked me out, I was asked to help serve communion at Reach Out camp here at Lakeside.

Before I had my first kiss, I had preached my first sermon.

Before I was even aware of my own sexuality I was sure of my calling to the ordained ministry in The United Methodist Church.

It seems as if for as long as I can remember I dreamed about the day that I would stand here in Hoover auditorium as part of this very clergy session.

What I never dreamed was that I would one day end up leaving.

Before going on Family Leave I met with some of my colleagues for an interview at the conference center. In that interview, I admitted that though I still felt strongly called to serve the sacraments, that I was having a hard time taking communion for myself.

I was told that this was a serious theological problem. And it was. You see I had made the theological mistake of believing that The United Methodist stance on homosexuality was indicative of how God actually sees me, my salvation and most importantly my calling.

I was hurt that my own church found "who I am" to be incompatible with christian teaching. I was tired of giving my whole self to the ministry but feeling afraid to let God's love and grace hold every part of me.

Now I take part in the Eucharist every Sunday and sometimes more than once if possible. The difference is that in the Episcopal Church I am allowed to bring my whole self to the altar - with the people I love and the God I love. I can bring my commitment to serve but also my need to be loved and forgiven. I can bring my sexual identity and my identity as someone called by God to the ordained ministry of Christ's holy church.

For that reason, it is not without great sadness and hurt but also joy and relief that I have joined St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Cleveland Heights and have begun the ordination process in the Diocese of Ohio.