

## **Journey of Faith**

### **Suzanne Brooks-Cope**

I am a cradle Presbyterian. I was raised, confirmed, married, and ordained in the church where my Great Grandfather laid the cornerstone back in the late 1800's. My family was very active in our home church until I was 8 years old when my younger sister died in a fire accident. After her death, my parents struggled making sense of a God that could allow such a tragedy to occur. However, my childhood faith was comforted in the knowledge that my sister was in God's care and was not suffering. My parents would try to return to the church from time to time. They made sure that all their children were confirmed but never truly became active in the life of the church again.

In high school most of my friends were involved in their home churches. I became committed to a youth group of a local Presbyterian Church close to my high school. I even dragged my parents back to my home church on several Sunday mornings. In college I became active in the Religious Life Association (RLA). I was the Worship Committee chair my junior year and then became the President of the RLA my senior year. I preached my first sermon in college. I remember the topic—"we worry too much." It was during my college semester aboard in Paris that I first felt God urging me into ministry.

I was a science major in college and was pre-med. By the time my senior year rolled around, I was conflicted about where to go next in my life. I decided to do a gap year and volunteer full time. I joined the Jesuit Volunteer Corp—the JVC offered me a placement in an inner-city health clinic and life in an intentional Christian community. My year commitment turned into three years. I loved living in community. My last two years in the JVC, I worked in a drop-in homeless shelter. There were times that I looked into the eyes of one of our clients and I saw Jesus staring back at me. During my JVC years, I felt my call more clearly but gently—it was as if God kept knocking on the back door until I finally opened the door.

In the fall of 1983, I began my first year at Princeton Theological Seminary. Princeton was not always an easy place for me. I was expecting a close-knit Christian community like my community experience in the JVC. It was not. The focus at PTS was academics and not formation. I had to work hard to form prayer groups and find an intentional community. I concentrated in the sciences in high school and college—the switch to theology and the ancient languages was not always an easy one. The highlight of seminary for me were my field ed placements. I worked as a chaplain Intern at Trenton Psychiatric hospital in my junior and senior years. (I met my husband Scott who was also working there). I served a federated Presbyterian and Episcopal Church for a year in Philadelphia. My husband and I shared a full-time internship position in a UCC church in Long Island before our senior year. My field ed experience helped

provide the Christian community that I had come to expect and need in my Christian journey.

My last year at Princeton was a bit of a challenge. Both my parents died the summer before my senior year three months apart from cancer. Scott and I learned we were also expecting our first child who was due three weeks before final exams my senior year. With God's help, I managed to pass my ordination exams on the first try, finish all my class work at PTS and my final assessment was approved by my CPM committee. I graduated from PTS with a six-week-old daughter sitting in the back pew of Princeton University's Chapel. God's grace was abundant through an exceedingly difficult and stressful year.

I have been blessed to serve four different churches in my thirty-six years of ordained ministry. Although each church had its challenges and growing edges, I have fond and wonderful memories of my experience in each community. I have friends that I cherish from all four congregations. My faith was stretched, strengthened, and challenged in each community. Zion, my first call allowed me to make mistakes, become more comfortable with preaching and moderate a few committee meetings. In my second call at Orange Park, the head of staff left just eighteen months after I arrived pushing me into more leadership rolls and expanding my job description. My third call, St. Andrews, was my first solo pastor position. Preaching weekly became a bit of a chore but also a blessing. My last call, St. Matthew's, was a larger congregation in a small rural village in Pennsylvania where the next closest congregation was six miles away. In some ways, serving the Kunkletown church was like walking back into history. Many men were still active in the congregation. The Strawberry Festival draws over a thousand visitors each summer. Although the congregation was rather traditional, I felt at home there (most of the time) as a progressive pastor. They enjoyed creative forms of worship such as Messy Church parables, Holy Humor Sunday, and a creative Vigil Service on Holy Saturday one year. My faith over the last few decades has become more comfortable; my prayer life more consistent and my desires and needs simpler.

This past year, we took a couple of months off from worship on Sunday mornings when we first returned to Jacksonville, but we began to miss having a church community. Scott and I both wanted to hear a wonderful choir and organ, so we headed downtown to Riverside and accidentally walked into the "wrong" church. (I did not remember there was a Methodist Church on the same block as Riverside Presbyterian). We walked into the back door on a rainy Sunday and fell in love with the pastor, the amazing choir and the churches passion for outreach and mission. We help serve a community meal each Wednesday night and attend a Sunday School Class led by a retired pastor. Scott has filled in as the accompanist once or twice (with much trepidation). It has been a joy to worship together on Sunday mornings and to appreciate the demanding work of others who help a community of people deepen their relationship with God and with each other. Our granddaughter attends with us and has joined the choir, the acolyte team and has helped with our Wednesday meals by handing out drinks to the homeless. It

turns out it was not the “wrong” church after all but where God has planted us these past few months.

I am enjoying being available to help my son and his family as they go through a tough time struggling with Huntingdon’s Disease. The next two or three years are going to be exceedingly difficult as Kim’s disease progresses. But I am also listening for God’s direction for the future and pondering how God may be calling me to serve in my retirement.