

Friends, I know a Church of love, but I also know a Church of pain. In fact, generations of my ancestors have endured pain. I've experienced church like a moth drawn to a flame. The love I've experienced along my journey comes from the pockets of people God has placed along my path. Yet, it's a journey that draws me back to a church that continuously inflicts pain.

Growing up on the reservation, my Native community has been historically traumatized due to acts of the Church and society. From that trauma I've grown into a life of self-doubt and a life constantly in spiritual tension.

My parents were raised in the Church on our reservation with a history of early American missionary influence saying our traditions and who we were as Native people were not of God, not Christ-like and not good. When I was age four, my parents separated, later divorcing. The church was literally family. Due to the divorce, my mom felt driven from the church because of the gossip that surrounded us. We wandered for many years in search of community.

The first 20 years of my life I grew up with a distaste for the Church, all stemming from those results of generational trauma and its impact. I struggled trusting God. Church and society tainted how I view myself, doubting my self-worth. It wasn't until college where I found campus ministry. As an extension of the Church, campus ministry kept me from giving up, from dropping out of college when feeling invisible within my community was amplified and forced to the forefront as I experienced life within the broader American narrative.

For so long, my identity has come from others telling me who I was, who I couldn't be, what I had to do to fit others' expectations for me. God led me to the United Methodist Church. As an extension of the Church, campus ministry led me toward baptism.

The waters of my baptism initiate a covenant with God claiming the Holy Spirit indeed works within me. For those marginalized throughout history, having ideologies and beliefs imposed upon us that have forged an identity not ours is not God's work. I've been in the Church just the past 7 years or so and I am already tired; yet I continuously find myself drawn to the water.

As I continue to grow into who God calls me to be: I've begun to accept gifts I've uncovered yet still struggle to embrace and understand. The following is my gift of expression.

-----

“The water is rising. How can something so healing easily become so overwhelming? It fills the inner most depths of my being but with the pollution of human, systemic acts and ideologies, those waters become smothering.

The tide rises and falls, but ultimately the depths of the sea increase and I am lost in the currents of injustice. The waves carry me to shore but my life preserver are allies that only take me so far before the coast guard rescues them, ignoring me.

My legs are tired. My arms are sore. I'm out of breath. Fighting the storm is endless. You would think by now I'd be a chief meteorologist, maybe even a storm chaser. I should be used to the storms. The forecast this week is the same as it was last week, last year, the last couple of centuries...

Creator God, it always feels like it's just you and me. How do I move forward when community is fractured, like cracked bark on a tree? Fractures and scars tell stories - often painful and wounded ones. They run deep, like the roots of trees.

I am trying so hard to stand strong. Humans cut us down, uproot us, trim our branches, and peel our bark. We fracture our beings. I hold on to my roots because God planted my soul. I've grown out of Mother Earth and I thank God for giving me life, breath, culture, tradition, gifts and a call - striving to make this world a better place.

Do not cut me down. Come sit beneath my shade for I have a beating heart that turns over leaves every season like the pages of my story. If we take the time to read the scars and fractures in our stories, you will hear my song for it is water, the living water, that keeps my faith and hope alive.”

~Bethany Printup-Davis  
Native American/Tuscarora,  
female, she/her/hers, laity