

In the fall of 2014, I was a sophomore at Macalester College. That fall a police officer in Ferguson Missouri shot and killed an unarmed black teenager Michael Brown. A year later a police officer shot and killed Jamar Clark an unarmed Black man in North Minneapolis. 8 months later a police officer killed Philando Castile an unarmed Black man in Falcon Heights - a suburb a few minutes north of St. Paul. 3 months later a contested and challenging presidential race came to a close that forced a set of cruel realizations: the potency of racism and fear in ordering our politics; the precariousness of our nation's future. These successive events fractured and broke open my reality and made me wrestle with pain I lacked the words to describe. I found myself as a Senior in the spring of 2017 yearning for somewhere, something, someplace to understand my role in all of this.

One fateful day in the spring, I attended a fair at my college for intentional living communities and year of service programs. Craig Lemming presented on Circle of the Beloved. I can't remember what he said. However, I remember how it made me feel. Hearing him describe Circle made me feel excited and curious. I gathered from Craig's description of Circle that it was a place earnestly wrestling with how to live in Beloved Community. A community aware of the brokenness of the country surrounding it but anchored in a particular place, North Minneapolis. I felt a tug inside me telling me that Circle was the place that I needed to be to wrestle with the things I needed answers to. Consequently, I first applied and was accepted to a Vista Americorps placement at the City of Lakes Community Land trust in North and then applied and was accepted to Circle.

In our society, we live with an increasing and unrelenting need to be hyper-productive. We have organized our worth around what we produce versus meeting human needs. Circle gave me a place to resist this trend in our society by having practices that enabled me to just be and deepen my self-awareness. There were many at Circle. Intentional dinners, group spiritual practices but one of these I want to focus on was my monthly chaplain check ins with Craig. Every month we would check in on 5-6 things. Vocation, Community, Work, Body Family and Relationships. This was a lifeline for me. I came to realize how much I neglected my family and body that year in circle. I'm now more attentive to my family but taking care of my body continues to be a challenge. Craig created a space for me to just be and that was a tremendous gift and indispensable for me in navigating the challenges that year.

There were moments living in community at Circle that changed the way I think, understood others and understood myself. We had a winter retreat at Circle where we stayed at the house over two days so that was Amelia, Melissa and myself. Tyler led us at the retreat through a set of practices to navigate conflict. At the training he explained a useful metaphor for conflict. He invited us to think of conflict as a "prairie burn" where conflict could become an intentional process of clearing brush and debris getting in the way of us being in relationship with each other. I don't know if Tyler had orchestrated us having a Prairie Burn, but we had a "Prairie Burn". There was a lot of brush for us to burn off. Looking back on it made so much sense. Earlier in the year, Craig had introduced us to M. Scott Peck's seasons of community. By this point, we had come to a state of community known as Chaos. We no longer attempted to avoid identifying our differences in communication, values and needs. Now we needed a way to navigate those differences. Through that process I came to honor and respect in a way I hadn't before the needs and values of my housemate Melissa. I confronted internal judgements and assumptions I made about her I hadn't appreciated before, stories I had of what it meant to live in a more rural place. That retreat enabled us to have stronger and a more honest relationships with each other.

At circle there are concentric circles surrounding fellows. One of those consists of the board. Although our encounters were generally brief and serendipitous, Steve Schewe one of the board members had a significant impact on me. There are those people whose way of being and acting in the world deeply follows the example of Christ. Steve is one of those people. Steve has this amazing ability to acknowledge and honor the presence of people. He has an abundant sense of self and gives generously without expectations and is someone who relishes giving as its own reward. I think Steve made such a tremendous influence on me because I see in him abilities I want to cultivate. He is the model for me of the man and leader I aspire to be one day. If I have any regrets about Circle, it was not being more intentional of reaching out to the people who surrounded me like Steve.

The support I received from Circle enabled me to navigate the ongoing tension I felt at my service placement and the questions it raised about my sense of self and vocation. I want to share a few words by fellow Quaker Parker J Palmer from his work "Let your life speak" that I think crystallizes the tension I felt around my service placement.

"You don't find your vocation through an act of taking charge. Vocation does not come from willfulness. It comes from listening. I must listen to my life and try to understand what it is truly about- quite apart from who I would like it to be about"

A gap started to grow as the months started to progress at my placement. The labor I did felt soul sucking and disempowering. Not because of the organization or the work. The work did not make me come alive. Most of the day, I worked at a desk reading and occasionally interacted with other people. This belies my sense of self. I have the instinct to seek out and build relationships. I relish understanding and connecting with others. I come alive in democratic spaces where I have to explain, debate and problem solve towards a common goal with others. As this gap between who I am and what I was doing grew, I felt small and alone. Over time, I lived into a teaching held in common by the traditions born from Christ's example "to thine own self be true". I realized a kind of death of self was happening and that I had to choose integrity and life. Throughout this process I talked with Craig and Amelia and shared the truth of what was happening. When I decided I would leave, I feared that it would mean I would also have to live Circle. Yet, Amelia made it clear to me that I could stay and that she and Circle would help me navigate what followed. I left my placement in November of 2017. I identified that I needed to take a risk and exploring community organizing. I searched, found, applied and in the January of 2018 started organizing with ISALAH as an Immigration organizer. For context, ISALAH is a faith-based, non-partisan vehicle for clergy, congregations, people of faith, and all Minnesotans to act collectively for racial and economic justice in Minnesota. I'm still wrestling with discernment even in this position. -Yet, there are many aspects of my sense of self that align with the work and I sense there is something I need to learn and wrestle with here.

It's been two years now since I was at Circle of the Beloved, and I miss it. Circle of the Beloved enabled me to have a discipline and a community to be, to reflect and to discover the movement of spirit in my life. Since leaving and now entering the rhythms of a young professional, I lack this kind of community. I'm striving to build it in my life as an alum. Circle also gifted me with being in relationships with incredible people that I otherwise wouldn't have met. Outside the context of Circle, I would never have met Melissa. My relationship with her grew my understanding of what it means to live in the Midwest and what it means to live someone with a different worldview and whom when we shared the same values we lived them out differently. Our culture lacks these places for these kinds of encounters.

As an organizer, I share the conclusion among others in the field that how we act as a larger community within the United States within the next 3-5 years will determine whether or not we live into the promise of becoming a multiracial democracy. If there was ever a more critical moment to have places like Circle of the Beloved, this would be that time. We need places to wrestle with what it means to live in beloved community and to be striving together to amend the breaches that have led us to such a broken place in this country. I want to thank and appreciate the people in this room who are responsible for having this circle exist, for those of us who decided to leap into it, and those of you who will decide tonight through your generosity to ensure it continues and that it widens in the years to come.