

# Pastor Jamie's Sermon

**Good Shepherd Church, August 6, 2023**

**“Living Authentically into Ministry”**

Good morning Good Shepherd Church! What a wonderful welcome I have received over the last couple weeks as I have been getting settled in and meeting many of you!

It's hard to believe, but it's been nearly four months since I first came to Calgary to visit and do my call meeting with the Good Shepherd Board.

It's an odd position to be in - serving one church while holding a call to another, working through the immigration process, preparing both mentally and physically to move to a new country, all while being excited to start a new journey with a new church and a new group of Christ followers.

And now, here we are together. My challenge, of course, is to figure out what I say to this brand-new group of people that I don't know well yet, and who don't yet know me well.

What words could I possibly share that would be helpful and meaningful without knowing you all yet?

Believe it or not I still don't have an answer to that question, so bear with me, but I thought it might be helpful to start by sharing with all of you a little bit of my faith journey. Most people look at me and wonder “how did SHE become a pastor?” And that's a valid question, so I'll try to answer it, knowing that much of my journey has been guided by the Holy Spirit, and I didn't necessarily have control over every twist and turn.

I grew up in a Catholic family. My grandparents on both sides of my family were Catholic, and they raised my parents Catholic as well. My Dad attended Catholic school where his experience caused him to lose some faith in the Catholic Church. When my parents decided to have kids, they also wanted us to have some faith formation opportunities.

So of course they sent us to Catholic Sunday School. I wouldn't say my family attended church EVERY Sunday, and as we got older, our Sunday church attendance became less and less. My sister and I got busier with activities, and I think my parents were growing tired of the Church for a variety of reasons.

My parents continued to send us to Sunday school and enrolled us in Confirmation classes as well, but they gave us the choice as to whether or not we wanted to confirm into the Catholic church. Both of us chose not to confirm, and shortly after that, my family stopped going to church regularly at all, and mostly just went on Easter and Christmas.

However, religion has always fascinated me, even as a young person. Choosing not to confirm into the church didn't mean I stopped believing in God, but it did begin a journey of faith exploration and education that I never would have gotten had I stayed in the Church I grew up in.

I explored a few different denominational and non-denominational churches while I was still in high school, but then I went off to college and my church exploration stopped, but my faith exploration did not. I had started to realize that church people seemed very hypocritical - they attended church on Sunday and claimed to believe in Jesus, but then walked out the doors and it was like they forgot who Jesus was.

I started to identify less as Christian in the typical sense, and more as “spiritual but not religious.” I was still pretty sure I believed in God or a higher power, but what that looked like I

was less sure about. I am someone who seeks answers, proof, and I'm naturally a skeptic, so blind faith in the institution of church was difficult for me. The world seemed so much bigger than what I grew up knowing.

I attended a liberal arts university in Wisconsin, and I was that young adult who had no real idea what I wanted to do for a living. The advice my advisor gave me my freshman year was to take classes that interested me, so that's what I did. And somehow, I ended up being at that school for 5 years, triple majoring in Communication Arts, Philosophy, and Religious Studies.

But, I should point out that my Communication Arts major focused on Rhetoric, and my Religious Studies major focused on Hinduism and Buddhism, so really, I have three different Philosophy degrees. My mom was frustrated with me because she said none of my majors were practical, but I found them all interesting and that's what mattered to me at the time.

But, guess what? None of them led to an actual practical career path, at least not immediately. Don't tell my mom that she was right.

I spent a few years working jobs that had health insurance, because in the US at the time, if you had any pre-existing conditions, you could not get health insurance on your own.

What I really wanted to do at that time was start my own business, but I knew that wasn't an option for me so I worked a few administrative assistant jobs and other odd and end jobs. I met someone, and got married, all the while not thinking much about organized religion at all, but still exploring different faith traditions.

My first husband and I decided to move to Colorado so he could go to school there. And that's where my slow journey back to religion started. Because of my very practical religious studies degree, I was able to get a job at a company called Patheos, which was a website aimed at "hosting the conversation on faith."

I was hired partly because of my administrative skills and partly because of my religious studies background, but the amazing part about this job for the purposes of this story was this was the first time I was introduced to Christians that were not all Catholic or Lutheran.

At Patheos, I worked with bloggers from all kinds of different faith backgrounds: Catholics, Evangelicals, Progressive Christians, people of the Jewish and Muslim faith traditions, Hindus, Buddhists, Atheists, Spiritual but not Religious people - almost any faith category you could think of was represented.

I was able to interact with people and learn about their lived faith experiences in ways I was never exposed to growing up in the church. And I know that sounds ironic because I'm a pastor now, but if all we are ever exposed to is one type of faith community, our frame of reference is quite limited.

At Patheos, I was also introduced to some amazing female pastors. I never knew women could be faith leaders before that experience. I worked with women like Nadia Bolz-Weber and Rachel Held Evans - and Nadia was covered in tattoos! Seeing someone I resonated with as a successful female faith leader was unthinkable at that time.

Due to some unfortunate circumstances and my dad's health, we had to move back to Wisconsin after my ex husband finished school, so I had to go back to administrative jobs for a while. But, the healthcare laws had changed by then, so I decided to start my own business as a dog trainer. I did that while working full time for a while.

Somewhere in here is when I divorced my first husband. Shortly after that, I met the man who would become my second husband. While my marriage to him ultimately did not work out long-

term either, he is an important part of my faith journey because he re-introduced me to the church.

He attended a non-denominational church, and when I first met him, I was still rather anti-organized religion, so I groaned inside a little bit that he went to church. But, it was important to him, so I went along, and it turned out that I actually really loved that church. They had a contemporary worship service and it was different than what I was used to.

I began to realize how little I actually knew about Christianity, even though I had grown up in the Catholic church and attended Sunday school most weeks. I love learning, and I especially love learning about religion. At that time, I was also working part-time at a church, and the pastor there helped me and encouraged me to apply for a Master of Divinity program.

When I applied for that program, I had no intention of becoming a pastor. My goal was to learn about Christianity and explore a tradition that was my family's tradition but that I did not feel I knew as much about as I would like. If you had told me when I applied to that program that I would become a pastor, I would have laughed at you!

I was accepted to the program, and only a few weeks after I was accepted to the program, I received word that the woman who owned the dog daycare facility that I was teaching training classes at passed away very suddenly. I began the process of buying that business from her estate. I successfully bought her business, so in April I got that business back up and running, and in August I started the MDiv program I was accepted to.

I am not actually sure how I survived that period in my life. I spent 4 years working toward my MDiv at Iliff School of Theology, and I somehow got a business through COVID and managed to pass my classes. And during that time, I quite literally stumbled onto the Moravian Church. After determining that it was not in fact a cult, I very quickly fell in love with the theology and found that it most closely aligned with my own personal theology.

Because this story is getting quite long, I'll just say that once I stumbled into the Moravian Church, one thing led to another, I began the ordination process, and here I am 4 years later.

In all seriousness though, it has been a long journey and a long process of discernment. And of course there is more to this story that I am happy to share with you, especially as it relates to my journey toward ordination. My experiences outside of organized religion have helped to shape the way I see organized religion and the possibilities and challenges we face.

I hope this is a good thing as your new pastor. And I share this story with you today to get to the actual message I want to offer.

One of the things I told the Ordination Review Committee from the very beginning of this process was I would always be authentic in ministry.

In fact, I'm pretty sure I told them more than once that if they did not like my authentic self, then that would be a sign from God that this wasn't the path I was meant to walk. And after every committee meeting, I reminded myself of this - there was nothing I could do if they didn't like me and my authentic self.

I was not interested in going into ministry if I was expected to become someone I am not. I was clear from the beginning that I would not hide who I am because I cannot possibly lead a church toward authenticity in ministry if I was not being authentic myself.

And after every meeting, they reaffirmed my call to ministry.

Do you know who else modeled authenticity in ministry? Jesus did. In today's scripture we heard the disciples tell Jesus to send people away so they could buy their own food, and Jesus

says absolutely not - we will feed these people. The disciples were full of doubt about how many resources were available and you can feel their skepticism when Jesus says they will feed everyone.

The disciples often represent our own doubts and fears. They struggled, just like we often do, to trust fully in the work Jesus was doing. So if the disciples, who were witness to Jesus's ministry and authenticity, often doubted him or struggled to trust fully, it is not surprising that those of us here 2000 years later would also struggle with doubt and fear.

Jesus modeled authenticity even though it went against customs and norms. He didn't mind that people, including sometimes his disciples, questioned his methods or his compassion for people - especially his compassion for people that society tended to cast aside as unworthy. We heard pastor Cory talk about his experiences with society last week.

The promise I made to myself when I began my journey into ordained ministry was that I would also lead and guide with authenticity. So I cannot stand here today and promise you that I will be the perfect pastor. If I did promise you perfection, you should probably question your Board's choice to hire me.

I can't promise perfection - no one can. But I can promise to bring my full, authentic self, with all of my human flaws and failings. And, my hope is that you all will come into our ministry together with your full, authentic selves as well. We can't promise perfection to one another. We can't promise perfection because we are humans, and humans are imperfect.

But if we can promise authenticity, if we can promise to work together, to model authenticity as Jesus modeled it for us, we can begin our ministry journey together with passion, compassion, and understanding. I promise to bring my authentic self to our collaborative ministry, and I hope you can do the same.

I look forward to hearing your faith journey stories, and I'm so excited to work together in ministry with each of you. I hope we can take some time to get to know one another, and I hope that by sharing my story with you, it will prompt you all to share your stories of faith, of your connection to Good Shepherd, or of whatever other journey you have been on.

I invite you to share your stories with me, and to share them with each other. Sometimes, we've known people for so long that we forget to share our faith stories, or we forget to update them as we grow and evolve in our faith. So let's share our stories with one another over the coming weeks and months.

May God bless this path we walk, may we welcome the Spirit into our ministry, and may we emulate the model that Jesus offered to us. Amen.

Let us pray: God of love and compassion, thank for sending your Son Jesus Christ to model authentic ministry for us. We pray as a congregation today that you would guide us in our new ministry relationship, that you would offer hope, love, and grace as we learn about one another and learn how to collaborate as we serve you in all we do.

We pray that through authentic ministry, we can take bold and brave action when necessary, and that we can set aside our fears and worries and live fully into your mission for us and our church community. May we accept your wisdom and guidance in all that we do together. All of this we pray in your name. Amen.