

When I was in middle school, if you asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I would have said that I wanted to be a corporate lawyer.

I imagined myself strutting down the streets of New York City, carrying an expensive briefcase and wearing sky-high black leather stilettos.

In my mind I was a rich, power-player.

I worked long hours.

I was ambitious, and tall and thin, with long hair that blew in the wind when I strutted down the street with my briefcase.

I thought this was going to make me happy.

You see, growing up, I thought I was poor.

My family did not live in poverty, but since I had friends who were richer than I was, I thought we were poor.

I also thought Florida was sleepy and boring.

'*Friends*' was my favorite TV show and I was obsessed with New York City.

I thought I'd go to New York and will become a rich lawyer!

Fast forward to college.

I am now a sociology major at a liberal arts school, emphasis on 'liberal.'

I learned all about social injustices, systemic racism, the cycle of poverty, and so forth.

I started to wake up.

I realized that I couldn't be a corporate lawyer.

That little voice that many of us try to ignore, it started getting louder.

It told me that I needed to do something with my life that helped improve the world, that contributed to the betterment of society.

I reluctantly accepted that money and power couldn't be my only motivators, if they were, then I'd never be happy.

So, I looked into becoming a social worker, because it looked really interesting.

I like helping people.

I like strategic problem-solving.

I thought it could be a good fit.

Then that little voice started speaking to me again, reminding me of how much I love the church, religion, theology, the UCC, and Jesus.

I tried to ignore it, but the voice kept telling me I had to do something faith-based.

So, I said okay, let's compromise.

I will go to seminary, but I don't want to be a local church pastor, so I'll also get my MSW (Master of Social Work) and will somehow combine my love of religion and social work and doing some kind of faith-based justice work.

With my plan in place, I apply to Union Theological Seminary in New York City, I get accepted, I begin my first year at seminary.

During that first year of seminary, I applied for the dual-degree MSW program at Columbia University.

I get denied.

Okay, fair enough, it is Columbia, after all.

I'll apply again next year.

So, I apply again the following year.

I get rejected, a second time.

Now I feel like everything is in shambles, my plan is falling apart.

If I can't get my MSW, what am I going to do with JUST a Master's of Divinity Degree (that's the degree I got from the seminary)?

Well, a few weeks after getting rejected from Columbia, I get a call from a local church pastor in Florida.

He's going to be taking a sabbatical over the summer, and would I be willing to serve his church for 3 months while he is gone?

Now I am really frustrated.

This opportunity has been presented to me but I DON'T WANT to be a local church pastor.

Well, I reluctantly accept the offer because I do love the church and I am a seminary student who needs money and it's a decent summer job, so, okay, I do it.

The rest is history, I fell in love with local church ministry, and here we are.

But you know, if I had listened to that little voice inside me from the very beginning, it would have saved me two applications to Columbia.

It would have saved me all the energy I expended trying to avoid parish ministry.

We all have that little voice inside of us telling us what we should do, the *right* thing to do.

Sometimes it's about our vocation, our job, our career.

But sometimes it's about how to spend our money or our time or how to treat a certain person.

The problem is that the voice gets drowned out by so many other things, which tell us that THEY will offer us the meaning that we seek.

The truth is that we are all seeking fulfillment, and lots of different companies are telling you that they offer it.

Just close your eyes and imagine all the messages you receive- whether it's the flashy ad on the back of the magazine on your kitchen table,

or the ad in the newspaper that you looked at this morning,

or the banner ad on the web browser you were looking at.

They all tell us to consume, that something else will make us gratified.

Schools tell us that a good education will gratify us.

Self-help books tell us that WE can fulfill ourselves, we just have to change our thinking.

Some people idolize the nuclear family.

Just take care of your family, that's the most important thing there is in the world.

That's your only job.

If your family is good, then you're good. Full stop.

All these loud voices drown out that still soft voice in the back of our minds which says that, actually, serving your community will fulfill you.

Actually, praying for your enemy will fulfill you.

Actually, forgiving the debt that someone owes you, will fulfill you.

Actually, helping someone get on their feet so they can support themselves will fulfill you.

Actually, cancelling your cable subscription (because you never watch it anyways), and giving that money away, will fulfill you.

Actually, opening the Bible and reading the scriptures once and a while might fulfill you.

Actually, giving away a lot of what you have and not buying new things, will fulfill you.

Actually, giving money away to causes you believe in, will fulfill you.

Actually listening to the story of an oppressed or marginalized person and hearing what it means for them to live in the United States, that will fulfill you.

Actually, following Jesus, the one who lived and died, and rose again, he will fulfill you.

These truths can get drowned out so easily by the other distractions in our lives.

If our lives are a compass, and Jesus is the north, these other messages are like magnetic fields pulling our compass dial in so many different directions, that we don't know which way to go.

And yet, I hope that the message of the church is the strongest one in your life.

The magnetic field that points you towards Jesus and those things, which ultimately do fulfill us-

love, compassion, generosity, understanding and forgiveness, I hope this community helps pull you in that direction.

We often think of that inner voice as our conscience, which comes from the Latin word *conscientia*, which means 'knowing together.'

We, as a faith community, in relationship with other people of faith, we help shape each other's consciences.

We amplify that small voice in the back of our minds.

So does God.

God, through Christ, helps form us from human beings into followers.

Worshipping together helps us listen to our conscience, recalibrate our moral compass so that it points towards the way of Jesus.

As Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. famously put it:

*“Cowardice asks the question, is it safe? Expediency asks the question, is it politic? Vanity asks the question, is it popular? But conscience asks the question, is it right?”*

The church is needed not only to help amplify each of our inner voices, within, but also to help calibrate the compass of our society, of the wider world.

Communities of faith are needed to remind the powers that be, that it's not all about money, that it's in fact about people, about compassion, about morality.

For us Christians, Jesus is the way.

Follow him, and you'll know you are on the right path.

He's the one who informs our inner voice, and coming to church is what makes that voice louder so that it can't be drowned out so easily.

This year's stewardship theme is called “The Way of Jesus: Journey to Generosity.”

It's informed by the scripture from the Gospel of John, in which Jesus answers Thomas' question, and tells Thomas, you'll know the way to go, because “I am the way, the truth and the life...”

I could have followed my compass down the wrong path and became a corporate lawyer, but because I had the church in my life, it amplified my conscience, and pointed me in the right direction, even as I tried to take many detours.



We all need the church in our lives, we need this building to be a place of solace and comfort for us.

We need worship and music to remind us of whose we are.

We need each other, so that we can serve each other, be beacon's of God's love for each other and remind each other of what is ultimately fulfilling.

And our society needs the church, to remind it of our higher ideals.

It's my hope that you will seriously think about how you are going to contribute to the life and ministries of our church in 2018.

It takes everyone, all of us, doing our part, to make this place a spiritual home for all who enter our doors.

Please give serious thought to how you will support our congregation next year, so that we can continue to be a place in which our compasses get recalibrated so that we stay on the right path,

making the right choices, by listening to that amplified voice inside our minds which calls us to love and serve the world, in Christ's name.

Amen.