Hi I'm Todd Siefker.  I’m the Intergenerational Ministry Coordinator here at First Congregational.  I recently came back to the Christian church after many years of being an outspoken critic of the church.  While I can still cite personal, as well as past and current societal reasons, why it is ridiculous to return to the church now, it has dawned on me that somehow I have been lucky enough to come across some amazing people who seek to live in the footsteps of Jesus.

Unfortunately, I have met some less than amazing people within the Christian faith.  I do not want to get into too much detail, because it’s pretty easy to find stories that are shockingly un-Christ-like in the church today.  But in case you think I’m just saying this in order to relate to those who’ve experienced some sort of religious trauma, I’m not.  I’m saying this because it is a part of my wild journey within Christianity and that is what First Congregational is all about—acceptance of people no matter where they are on their journey.

But before I get to those amazing people who have shown me the potential in Christianity, I have unfortunately experienced some of the potential downside of Christianity.  For instance, as a child I was told that I would go to hell if I didn't take my memory verses more seriously.  That fear of hell eventually led me into to a guilt-ridden religious fundamentalist period in my life.  Once I accepted Jesus as my Personal Lord and Savior via a Billy Graham Crusade on TV, it was conveyed to me that I now needed to go out and tell others about Jesus.   In those teenage and early 20s years, I felt that if I didn't tell everyone I met about Jesus, that it meant I really didn't love God.  At the same time, I felt like my cowardly lack of evangelization was allowing others to ignorantly stumble into hell.  The after-life centered faith started to crumble when I went to work for a summer at a Mexico City garbage dump.  I started to see that hell could be right here on earth.  It became very clear to me that a faith that doesn’t address real-life here and now issues like poverty, wasn’t the kind of faith I could believe in anymore.

I eventually ended up working two years at an Indian Reservation in New Mexico.  There was a different kind of poverty there, and some of it was related to the spirituality of the church I worked for.   The church leader I worked for at the church was full of bitter judgment and hatred.  I decided to not only leave that church, but also leave anything to do with religion in general.  I went on a low-budget traveling spree for the next five years.

My Residence Director in college Dave Nonnemacher who took us on rock climbing excursions and snow showing adventures in northern Minnesota and Rocky Mountain National Park, while reading things like Wendell Berry and Ron Cider.  There was Father John, the artist who would take me out in the New Mexican desert and find chards of glass and rocks and turn them into first century looking mosaics.  He made the faith a thing to awe.  And he would loan me a stunning copy of Thomas of Celano’s book on the life of Saint Francis of Assisi.  I would read that book, with it’s gold embossed first letter of every chapter, under a cottonwood tree overlooking a valley in the Sacramento Mountains.  I would meet a Franciscan friar who lived in a hermitage dug out by hand in the side of a mountain.  He would invite me in.  We smoke cigars.  He’d have a few books.  Siddhartha by Herman Hesse and Thomas of Celano’s biography of St. Francis.  The essentials.  There with the sun setting over the Tularosa Basin with the hazy White Sands off in the distance, he would tell me stories about being a hobo train riding priest.  And we would laugh hard.  And I would meet Father Camilo, a desert solitaire Franciscan living without electricity and running water with the Yaqui Indians in Mexico.  He would loan me his tuck tape tattered copy of Don Quixote, which was more worn than his Bible.  I would read Cervantes by Kerosene lamp and be infected with ridiculous dreams of travel.  I would meet Father John, Father Marty, Padre Camilo, and Fray Ivo.  Each an amazing testament to the beauty of Christ and his church.

But I lived a long time suppressing these stories.  I was like, ‘There’s no real authentic place in Sioux City that is even remotely like the Franciscan monastery where I lived for two years.  What I didn’t realize was that the reason I couldn’t find another authentic Franciscan—type community, was because I wasn’t investing anything into the community.  Consequently there was no return.

It became apparent that having a degree in religion with no desire to go into religious work didn't make my job prospects very bright.  In the course of my traveling, I came across a Franciscan monastery in Mexico.  There I saw the beauty of the Christian faith.  The Franciscan brother took me in with no Spanish speaking skills and made me one of them.  They silenced all my bitterness for the church.  There was no way I could not see the good in their feeding six hundred people a day or providing free health care, dental care, mariache lessons, free coffins for families that couldn't afford funerals, etc.  There I experienced Grace.  Instead of the weight of saving the world with words, it was just working with others toward some good here and now.  Instead of hate and judgment I saw unconditional love. I came back to Iowa and I looked for something like that Franciiscan monastery here in Sioux City.  I was out shopping.  I tried many different churches in Sioux City.  And guess what?  None of them were meaningful like what I had experienced in Mexico.  Then First Congregational asked me to speak.  I did.  And I told them a longer version of this story I'm telling you now.  And I felt that grace once again.  These are people who are not looking for everyone to have the same exact belief system.  They weren't thretened by a story that involved some less than desirable twists and turns.  Instead they saw my journey as an asset to their community.  I became involved with leading a seriies called the Admiration Series where we look at the lives of amazing people stretching from Buddha, Mohammad, St. Francis, to Mother Teresa, Jimmy Carter, and Wendel Berry.  I saw a man at our Admiration Series start a sentence with the words, "My husband..." and I saw no reaction.  This man was born a jew, educated as a Catholic, and ended up as Mormon for awhile and now has a husband.  And in this church is accepted like everyone else.  Not tolerated.  Or put up with.  But appreciated for his unique journey.  Just as they appreciate my unique story.   And I realized that the reason I couldn't find another Franciscan monastery type place was they I wasn't throwing myself into any place like I had at the monastery.  We don't believe we are the only way.  But we are a place that challenges the close-minded, hate-filled, judgemental side we often see portrayed about Christianity, then we are here to counter that sterotype as we seek to become a community of faith that serves our community.