Leaving home to find one’s self is an old narrative. For me, that narrative tangles with one of leaving the church to find my own spiritual path. Leaving home and leaving the church always felt so much alike that at times it was difficult to tell them apart—the homesickness for a good round of hymn singing as sharp as the hunger for my mama’s poke greens. It took years to find a way to make my home in the world, and years more to discover how to tell the stories that would circle back around and gather up what I needed, what was worth keeping, from all that messy mixture of heart and hurt that had gone before.

The call, it turns out, unfolded in my life while I waited. And continues to unfold, as I am able to have the courage to be wholly alive, authentically myself, and actively connected to the world around me. When I quiet the voices of external expectations, when I quiet my own desire for the approval of others, I can begin to attune myself to my own inside voice. It is through this inside voice that God’s call comes to me, and that call invites me into a life of celebration and service. Frederick Buechner put it this way.
The kind of work God usually calls you to do is the kind of work (a) that you most need to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. . . . Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.

Waiting for the call. It is the necessary task of a girl like me, raised to believe in a concrete and imperious deity. Pretending not to expect any divine messages or intervention but with one ear always cocked for the voice in the night that would call me by name. I waited, and while I waited I made what I thought were my own plans. And while I waited I found my way to useful work, to woman loving, to Carol, to Lucy and Gracie, to a radically welcoming church, to a round, rich world of family and friends. As I sat with my mother on her hospital bed and loved her entirely, without the least desire to add or take away one thing, my heart found its way back home.

I tried to work out the problem of how I would relate to the church. Like many gay Christians, I loved the church I had grown up in. I hated it, too, for the violence it had done me and others, for making it so painfully difficult to come home to ourselves. The church has been a source of both nourishment and injury in my life. Church teachings often provide the foundation on which people build their discrimination against and even hatred of gay and lesbian people. That’s too polite. An awful lot of churches spew hatred of gay people, disguising human hatred as something ordained by God. Many churches refuse to ordain openly gay clergy or to provide holy union ceremonies for gay couples. More, they depict love between gay people as perverse and depraved. Pope John Paul II, outraged by the growing acceptance of gay marriage, described gay parent adoptions as a source of “violence against children.” Unfortunately, such language sets the stage for real violence against both children and their parents. Rabid denouncements of gay people and their families are all too common among the evangelical Christians from whence I come. When I learn that someone is a deeply committed Christian, I often feel a knot in my stomach, a real sense of danger, until I have a chance to learn more about how that commitment shapes his or her attitude toward sexual orientation. Many gay Christians
have solved this problem by severing their connection to organized religion and sometimes to their faith as well.

My father, knowing how the Southern Baptist stance on women and gays had hurt me and longing to persuade me not to write off the whole lot, sent me, sometime in the early 1990s, copies of two sermons. In “Baptists and Women,” W. Robert DeFoor of Harrodsburg, Kentucky, took issue with the traditional Baptist teaching that women’s roles in the church should be restricted. Paul Duke’s “Homosexuality and the Church” looked at recent biblical scholarship on many of the scriptures regularly used to condemn homosexuality and concluded that there is no longer absolute certainty about that condemnation. He preached:

I dream of a church where people are safe to tell all their secrets.
I dream of a church where no one has to struggle alone with who they are and what they desire. Where those who find themselves with homosexual orientation can say so and be answered with empathetic love and prayers and support. . . . Where no one has to hide and slowly, quietly die of loneliness in the house of God.

I was touched to see Daddy continue the conversation through the words of his fellow pastors. He was telling me he still believes texts are open to interpretation and more: God isn’t done with any of us yet, not him, not the church, not me.

In 1998, the church we now belong to, Broadway United Methodist, found itself vitally engaged in the denomination’s struggle over sexual orientation issues. Our pastor, Gregory Dell, performed a holy union service for two gay men from our church. A United Methodist from outside our congregation filed charges against Pastor Dell, and a trial ensued. Eventually, he was suspended for a period of twelve months. Throughout the trial and its aftermath, our congregation remained united in our support for the full inclusion and celebration of gay and lesbian Christians in the life of the church. A key moment during the months leading up to the trial came in November when Fred Phelps announced a plan to demonstrate outside our church. Phelps is a Baptist minister from Oklahoma who has achieved notoriety by organizing protests against gays and lesbians (and recently even against the families of American soldiers killed in Iraq, alleging that the U.S. government promotes homosexual-
ity). He and his small band of supporters display signs with slogans such as “God hates fags.” Just a month before Phelps’s planned protest at our church, he and his ugly band of followers had demonstrated at the funeral of Matthew Shepard, a young man who was taken from a gay bar, beaten to a pulp, and left to die hanging on a fence in Wyoming. Our church did not want to do anything to give energy to Phelps’s demonstration, but, coming as it would on the heels of the Matt Shepard funeral, his presence, we believed, required some sort of response. Calling on people from the Lakeview neighborhood, where the church is located, and beyond, the church invited folks to join a counterdemonstration, the formation of a circle of love that would surround the church on the day of the demonstration.

I was out of town that day, attending a professional meeting in New York City. Carol, Lucy, and Gracie made their way to the church, parking several blocks away because the crowds made access to the parking lot impossible. That night I called home to find out what had happened. Carol told me that the circle of love had included between fifteen hundred and two thousand people from the neighborhood, from around Chicago, and from hundreds of miles beyond. The circle of love was coalition at its best, crossing boundaries of geography, religion, race, and sexual orientation to bring together a diverse throng with a shared passion for justice. Hundreds of police officers were on hand to keep the crowd safe. Fred Phelps was there, as well, with a small band of demonstrators carrying their viciously hateful signs. But his group of fifteen or so was outnumbered more than a hundred to one. Inside the circle of love, the church was packed, and the service that took place that morning was marked by a great spirit of love and unity.

Lucy grabbed the phone to give me her version of events. “Mama-Jackie,” she said excitedly, “it was great. The crowd was huge, but most of them were for us. The love side was so much bigger than the hate side.” That’s how we want it, I thought. We want a world where the love side vastly outnumbers the hate side, where circles of love surround and protect all we hold dear, where a love of justice makes neighbors and family of us all.