I am a dyed in the wool Methodist. That is to say, from birth, it was apparent I would be a Methodist. I grew up in the Methodist church my great-grandfather helped build when he was Methodist minister in the early 1900’s and, at only three weeks old, I played baby Jesus in my home church’s Christmas play. So yes, I am unmistakably a Methodist. When most people hear about my family’s ties to the Methodist church, it makes all the sense in the world that I became a United Methodist pastor at such a young age… but that was not always my path.

While I did grow up going to worship, Sunday school, Vacation Bible School, and practically every other church kid’s activity you can imagine, around the beginning of middle school I began to have serious doubts about the Christian faith. Some of the questions that plagued my mind were, “How could a man come back from the dead?” “How could water be turned into wine?” and “If miracles really happen, how come I’ve never seen one?” So, as many tweens and teens often do, I began to question my place in the Christian church. By the time I was in seventh grade, I found every excuse I could to avoid going to youth group and Sunday morning worship and went on to spend the next four years away from any church.

I am sure my absence from my faith community played a significant part in the struggles I endured those four years of middle and high school. I battled personal demons that led me to isolate myself, engage in self-harm, and sink deeper and deeper into depression. On three separate occasions I was inches away from taking my own life, and even went so far as to poll my 8th grade class to see who would miss me if I committed suicide that summer. I came to believe there was no person who could possibly love someone as unremarkable and insignificant as me. Yet, through the actions of a handful of people, I never took that final, lethal step.

Much of what fueled my personal issues were rooted in a tremendously low self-esteem. As I entered high school, I began to spend more time personally developing myself in music and martial arts, which paid off in tremendous dividends. I was quickly climbing the ranks of my high school band and became the only freshman to be ranked at the area level, only one step removed from being a state band member. I began to lose weight, make new friends, and even attract the attention of girls who would never have, at least in my mind, given me the time of day. Entering my sophomore year of high school, I had the appearance of someone who was on top of his game, remarkable in multiple avenues, and clearly of significance... and I did not hesitate to let anyone know so. In addition to all that, I made it a point to let everyone know I did all this on my own power, with no help from God or the Church.

In many ways, I began to make it my mission in life to let my fellow students know they did not need God or faith in anything to make it, and to do so was foolish and demonstrated a lack of intelligence. I began returning to the scriptures strictly for the purposes of crafting arguments against the validity of the Bible, and would debate unsuspecting Christians in the hallways and classrooms of my high school, often to victory. In more than one instance, I played a significant role in leading people away from their faith. Thankfully, for me, a few friends never gave up on inviting me to church.

One Friday evening, after my intended plans for the evening fell through, I decided to go to the monthly youth rally at the First Baptist Church in my hometown of Raymondville, TX. that some of my Christian friends regularly invited me to. My plan was to go this rally and demonstrate how little an impact it would leave on me; to walk out entirely unchanged. But, that day, my plans continued to fall through. Sitting in a pew at the back of that sanctuary, after hearing a message about Jesus walking on the water, and being exposed to contemporary worship for the first time, God absolutely wrecked my life for the ordinary. With tears beginning to roll down my cheeks, I came to realize that despite the outward appearance I projected, despite achieving many of the goals I believed would pull me out of my darkest places, despite claiming to need no one but myself, I had never stopped hurting. Although I spent much of my time feeling great, I realized it was as if I was living on a pedestal with the narrowest of bases – I may have been flying high, but it did not take much to knock me right back down to the ground. While I had even fooled myself into thinking I was “over it,” I wasn’t. That night, walking up the aisle in response to an altar call, having to walk past many of the “friends” I often ridiculed over their faith, God knocked me down to the ground harder than I knew I could fall… and it was the best thing that could have happened to me. That night, I became a follower of Jesus.

In experiencing the grace of Jesus, I started to feel whole like I had not felt in a long time. I came to realize my worth as a human being was not founded in my accomplishments, my grades, my looks, or anything else I could improve on by myself. No, my worth was rooted in my identity as a beloved child of God. Within six months, I was back in my home church and became president of my youth group. Over the next two year of high school, I accepted my call to ordained ministry and started making plans to go to a university that would prepare me for a career as a United Methodist clergyperson. I went on graduate with a B.A in religious studies, get married to my high school sweetheart, graduate from seminary, and receive my first pastoral appointment as associate pastor here at First UMC McAllen.

I have experienced, and can now bear witness, to the amazing work God has done in my life, and can do in your life too. That is my story, my testimony, my witness to God’s work in my life.