I grew up in a house that valued questions. Hard questions weren’t shied away from. My dad was a pastor turned musician and my mom was a clinical social worker, so it comes as no surprise that hard questions were met with rigorous answers. Frequently those answers were, themselves, questions - invitations to wrestle with a difficult experience until God and I had come to an understanding.

From the very beginning my relationship was with God, not with the church. And my relationship with God was built on the belief that God was positively delighted by my questions and thirst for answers, even when my Sunday school teachers cringed. Maybe especially when my Sunday school teachers cringed. It was like God and I shared a secret - that the old rules didn’t matter anymore. Illustrative of this is the fact that my favorite hobby as a kid was thinking. The bigger and more difficult the problem, the better. I good problem would take months of concentrated thought to resolve. A really good problem would take years.

A cardinal example of this was my growing distrust of anyone who claimed that QUILTBAG - Queer, Undecided, Inter-, Lesbian, Trans, Bi, Asexual, and Gay - folks couldn't pursue themselves or relationships and be Christian. I couldn’t understand how a genuinely loving relationship between peers pursuing God could ever be “wrong”. I insisted on a logical answer that stemmed from love for queer people instead of judgment, but never got a satisfactory answer. So I concluded that, until new evidence came in, everyone else was wrong. God and I had the quiet agreement that I was open to being wrong, but for the moment I would err on the side of love. That conviction cracked open an important truth for me: authority and prestige are meaningless, the ways we always do things are inherently suspect, and the wisdom of the dominant group MUST be challenged.

Because the rules we’re told to live by put us in a game we can’t win. There is no success great enough to satisfy those rules. It’s always possible to be richer, thinner, prettier, succeed with less effort, to be more “normal”. This game is designed to break us. The good news is that we have a God who sees that and refuses to accept it. But God does something we don’t
expect - the board, the pieces, and the players all stay the same. But we get a different set of rules.

In the sermon on the mount, Jesus says “Humble people are very fortunate!” . . “for the kingdom of Heaven is given to them. Those who mourn are fortunate! For they shall be comforted. The meek and lowly are fortunate! For the whole wide world belongs to them. Happy are those who long to be just and good, for they shall be completely satisfied” and so on. (Matthew 5:1-12)

God gave us a completely different set of goals that lets us find real value in our actual experiences. As a personal example of this, some of you know that I lived with severe chronic pain and illness through adolescence and early adulthood. It turned out I had Lyme disease for 14 years. I went through a lot of doctors and more blood tests and x-rays than I can count, but the results always came back as “normal”. Despite the pain, the associated insomnia, depression, illness, and loss of mobility I kept doing what I was “supposed” to do. I went to college to study technical theatre, following my love just like everyone told me to. Every year I got worse I pushed away the inevitable truth that I couldn’t physically do the work I was training for. I kept following the rules, working hard, grinding out success on three hours of sleep a night. A few years later, I was finally successfully diagnosed and treated. After nearly 15 years I had my first pain free day. I cried. I didn’t know life could feel like that.

So I got right back on the horse, got a job as a carpenter at U of M, moved to Ypsi, moved in with my girlfriend, and life looked pretty good. Fast forward three years and I was getting sick again. I had to take at least two sick days a month. I ate 7 to 9 thousand calories a day and lost weight. My doctors told me I had “the right kind of problem”. I left that job to start working in the budding Detroit film industry - the week before Snyder cut the film incentives. In the next six months I lost my career, my apartment, and my partner of 5 years. I felt utterly destroyed. . because I was trying to play by the old rules.
The old rules told me I was a failure. They told me all of my 20s were a waste and the only thing I had to show for that time were scars and shame. But Jesus said the poor in spirit are blessed. He said those who mourn will be comforted and the gentle will inherit the world. I felt so broken that no one could accept me, but here’s Jesus saying “that’s exactly what I love the best about you”. The places that are tender, the things about me I want to hide because they aren’t tough, they’re strange, or shameful, or just weird, Jesus says those are the best bits.

My Christianity isn’t fire insurance and it isn’t paying the tab for being a bad person - it’s the slow transformation of how I see things. It’s learning to see myself the way God sees me. It’s learning to love my real self, my secret self.

That transformation feels a lot like breaking. It can feel like losing hope, because we have to give up the old rulebook. We have to actually change to be changed. But even in the hard times, the new life is so much better.

There a japanese artform called kintsugi. It’s the process of mending broken bowls with gold or platinum. The precious metal is ground to dust and mixed with lacquer and that’s used to fix together the broken pieces. The mended seams aren’t subtle. They’re often as thick as my finger. Instead of trying to hide the repair, the goal is to highlight it, to celebrate the events the piece has been through. I think that’s how God sees us. The places we think are broken and unloveable are the very places God wants to highlight and celebrate.

Remember, “you are the world’s light - a city on a hill, glowing in the night for all to see. Don’t hide your light! Let it shine for all; let your good deeds glow for all to see, so that they will praise your heavenly father”. (Matthew 5:13)