

WHY I LOVE CONGREGATIONS

One Saturday afternoon I was reading in the church library while my dad worked on his sermon down the hall. A book that imagined Jesus as a seven-year-old captured my imagination. The Word became exactly my age. And I wanted to know that child who talked often and honestly to God, whose spirit made friendships better, who knew a love he would never outgrow. I wanted to share my life with God like this other seven-year-old. When my dad finished his sermon, I explained to him that I wanted to grow up with Jesus. The next day I joined our congregation.

I can't name the title of that book I read, or its author. But I know that someone in our church loved that story and put it on the shelf to share. I never forgot how stories nurture our faith at every stage of life. Discovering the ones that move us to a deeper faith and sharing them with each other is a church's ongoing adventure. I met C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity* as a college freshman, then started handing it to friends when they confessed their struggles with faith. Frederick Buechner's *Sacred Journey* inspired my seminary class to write our own spiritual autobiographies more honestly. Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* taught my small group that serious seeking is also joyful. When I couldn't write, a teacher handed me Annie Dillard's *The Writing Life* to help me lift the pen again. When I was searching for my purpose, a friend tore out two underlined pages from Kathleen Norris' *Dakota*, scribbled *These words were meant for you* in the margin, and left them in my mailbox. Through *Upstream* Mary Oliver convinced me that authors she only met through reading were her friends, and that she was part of my congregation by cutting to the chase with words that made me dizzy: *The most regretful people on earth are those who felt the call to creative work, who felt their own creative power restive and uprising, and gave to it neither power nor time.*

Some of the stories we need to read fit on bookshelves. But many of them exist within our congregation itself. We recognize this in worship through sermons and reflections. We realize this whenever we sit around a table in Beecher Garden or the reception room and trade concerns or funny instances. We experience this as we compare tales about subway encounters, or confide while weeding an Urban Farm plot, or confess a fear, or describe a tedious parenting season. We know this truth when our small group meets on Zoom to discuss how we struggle and how we find strength.

St. Ignatius taught Christians to discover the story of our lives within the story of God. His approach to reading Scripture with a pen and notebook helps us slip inside the biblical story and discover the truth we hope to find. Asking what fresh word God wants us to hear in the text, and writing about that, reminds us that we can rediscover the Church's story daily. When writing groups have gathered at Plymouth to "Pray with Our Pens," I remember again how lively the sacred story is and how it creates friendships among us.

Our personal stories are not really ours alone. They are part of the community that is shaping them. My story is part of yours, and yours enriches mine. They all belong to God who is working on countless drafts with us, suggesting new possibilities for our plots and character. We all have a story to tell—and when we work on them within our congregation and share them with each other, we see that our stories are both larger and more holy than we realize.

~ Carol Younger