

Looking Back, Then Forward

Every Sunday growing up, I would put on a nicer-than-normal outfit and walk down the street with my mom and sisters to church. We would sit through the children's sermon and then run out of the sanctuary to Sunday school, where I would reunite with my two best friends and chatter when I should have been listening.

Some of my most vivid childhood memories are in church — participating in pageants, reading my confirmation speech, watching my sister get baptized or hiding under the food table during coffee hour. I thought of Sunday mornings as a social engagement, a fun weekend get-together rather than a time of reflection and worship.

It wasn't until I was older that I appreciated the ritual of church as more than a chance to see friends. As I moved from grade school to high school and then college, I realized how deep and wide-reaching the roots of my church foundation stretched. My two best childhood friends were made at church school. Last weekend, I was a bridesmaid in one of their weddings. I was married in September by the same minister who baptized me, and when he gave the homily, I knew he was speaking from a place of true understanding. My first babysitting job was through a church family and the Director at my first "real world" job was introduced to me by a church member. Most importantly, my moral foundation and idea of myself was reinforced through time spent within the church community. My congregational upbringing gave me a stronger idea of right and wrong, of myself as a person and how I wanted to treat others, reinforcing what my parents worked to teach me as well.

Since then, I've happily made new memories in church. When I found Plymouth, shortly after moving to Brooklyn, I felt the same sense of belonging as I had in my old parish. I was welcomed without hesitation and immediately recognized the warmth of the congregational community.

Congregationalism has always represented a "come as you are" teaching

in my mind. While that line may not be explicit in the Bible, there are variations of it that underscore this idea. “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest [Matthew 11:28],” Jesus says, an invitation to travel along his path. Later, in the book of John, Jesus issues an invitation to salvation, saying “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out [John 6:37].”

It is the congregationalist spirit that invites us to come as we are, but it is more than that. It is an invitation to be the best version of ourselves, with support from a greater community. When I think back on my church memories and all that my congregational background has contributed to the person I am today, I am grateful. But it is in looking forward that I find the most spiritual inspiration. Every Sunday is an invitation to better ourselves, to not only be reminded of the teachings of our faith, but to put them into practice in our everyday lives. In this way, Plymouth is not just a house of worship, but a support system for living out the word of Christ, for striving to become our best selves.

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