

WHAT CONGREGATIONALISM MEANS TO ME

I vividly remember the first time I walked into Plymouth Church as an adult. It was early on a Sunday morning. The building was quiet and I was struck by its austere perfection. The light marble floors and rows of tall windows were spotless. In the garden, not a branch or a blossom was out of place.

As I walked up the church house stairs, I thought, I do not belong here. Where is the Plymouth I remember from my childhood visits? That Plymouth had worn wooden floors and slightly tattered checkered tablecloths. That Plymouth smelled like freshly baked butter cookies and echoed with laughter. That Plymouth had soft, wide open arms.

Some of my childhood friends and neighbors attended Plymouth and I envied them. They invited me to holiday fairs and family dinners. They went caroling on dark winter nights. They strung warm, flickering lights along the iron fences and gates on Orange Street during Advent.

The church my family attended was by contrast, somber and seemingly eager to remind me of my many shortcomings. I went weekly, dutifully, because I could see how important the church was to my father. I admired the way he knelt and bowed his head in earnest prayer for most of the service while I day dreamed and invented counting games to pass the time.

Just as I was beginning to fear that the Plymouth of my childhood was no more, the silence was broken. I heard and then saw a boisterous group of children running down the arcade, running to Sunday School. The adults following behind didn't yell at or reprimand them. They were chatting and looked as happy as the children. At the arcade doors, the group split by age. My daughter and I followed the younger ones downstairs. We joined the circle on the rug and were handed a cup of snack.

The teacher knew everyone's name. She asked how their week had been and listened as each child shared. She talked a little about her week- her struggles, joys and concerns that needed prayer. Then she held up a cloth board. To help tell the Bible story, she added felt characters to the board. They were full of detail and color but lived in a plain, worn cardboard box. The story to life. After the teacher carefully returned each character to the

box, we held hands. The closing prayer included everyone's request.

I was amazed- blown away- and when I thanked her, she politely dismissed my praise saying, "I'm just loving on them. That's all, nothing more."

But I knew, that as I had remembered and as I had expected, that there was and is so much more here at Plymouth. So much love, so much care, so much acceptance. It is an honor and a privilege to be a part of Plymouth. I have learned so much watching this congregation take care of each other. As my father wrote in a text last night, "Plymouth is so important for you." It is for and to us all.

Julia Rassmann