

WHAT CONGREGATIONALISM MEANS TO ME

My ancient Celtic ancestors believed that heaven was separated from earth by a thick and impenetrable barrier, but that there were *thin places* — mountaintops or fjords — where that rigid membrane can become like a sheer curtain or a cracked door, and where for a moment we can feel God's presence from the other side.

I was skeptical of this type of mysticism. Jaded by my years in Alphabet City, I had to endure the pantheistic musings of part-time yoga instructors in order just to exercise. Atop bar stools between Avenues A and B, I developed the superpower to sit stone-faced through tattoo origin stories meant to convey the spiritual depth of the bearer / victim (“...and then this one on my neck is Sanskrit for ‘impermanence’”). As an overworked corporate lawyer, I managed my commute with the precision of a man who billed his time in six-minute increments. In order to limit my five-block walk to the subway to five minutes, I would studiously avoid eye contact with my neighbors: the Falun Gong on 4th St., the Hells Angels on 3rd St., the Hare Krishnas on 2nd St., the comrades of the *Catholic Worker* on 1st St., and finally the Lubavitchers who would congregate at the subway stop itself. My indifference to metaphysics was not necessarily an ideological commitment, but rather more like a time-management technique.

But then, during a singular infant baptism at Plymouth Church, I was reawakened to the transcendent. David Fisher held a beautiful baby aloft and led the congregation through the magnificent liturgy we used at the time. In those days, the congregation would covenant with the parents to share the heritage of Abraham and Sarah, to model our Christian faith, and to wait for the day when the child would join us as a member of the church.

That baby is a teenager now, and sadly I do not remember his name. But I do remember where I was sitting. I remember the radiance of our old liturgy and the realization that *this* is how words become *poetry*. And I remember

the sudden sensation that God was with us; that He approved of us; that He would help us keep our promises to this family. In that moment, a friendship with Jesus didn't seem merely *possible*; it seemed *probable*.

Orange Street became a thin place.

But thin places are fleeting.

James Koster recently wrote movingly about how church work can be an enemy of spirituality. Plymouth's Treasurers understand this. When I occupied that lamentable office, I marveled at how I would provide people with a line-item copy of Plymouth's budget in March, only to be accused of a lack of transparency by these same people in May. Frustrated, I would gaze at the sanctuary windows depicting the history of Congregationalism in nineteen frames, searching beseechingly (but futilely) for a twentieth window portraying that great Congregationalist tradition — witch burning. But then a voice — possibly God's but probably Brett's — would remind me to love my neighbors. All of them. You missed a few. Yes, them too.

Though a pandemic exile in New Jersey has exaggerated my physical distance from Plymouth, my emotional connection has been incredibly durable. Thanks to church work. In my pre-pandemic role on the Capital Campaign, I witnessed Plymouth's profound generosity first hand. And now, when I think about a twentieth window to celebrate the history of Congregationalism, it might depict the anxiety of someone staring at a spreadsheet planning to do more with less; a nonagenarian with eyeglasses on the bridge of their nose writing a check; a teenager placing babysitting cash in an offering plate; a task force in deliberation; a volunteer committing to a sign-up sheet. It's not easy to dramatize the thousands of decisions a Congregationalist makes in order to live by a covenant. But that doesn't mean it's not inspiring.

Not all thin places are serene or windswept. Some have frayed cushions and needy plumbing. And saints.

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