

BECOMING A CONGREGATIONALIST – WHAT THAT MEANS TO ME

When Jeff and I became Plymouth members, now ten years ago, one of the most frequent questions I posed to him after church, or more accurately, after any formal meeting of church members was: “so, who is in charge at that place? Seriously, where does the buck stop and who is the big boss?”

Not being able to deduce this based on title or seniority, I assiduously observed the non-verbal cues for illumination; sometimes I just asked point blank about the hierarchy, seeking a senior someone whose yea or nay made things so at Plymouth. Truth be told, I wanted a “church boss,” so that I could be absolved of any real responsibility. My attachment to hierarchy was secured early on. The eldest of five children, I was raised by a lapsed Catholic and a polite Episcopalian, both turned Presbyterian, then turned Baptist; my spiritual upbringing was brimming with Boards of Deacons and Sessions of the Church and Elders. I was cradled in the arms of religious structure.

I had no idea (until I was 36!) that I was so addicted to someone else being in charge. I mistakenly believed I was a liberated, self-reliant, can-do New Yorker. And yet when it came to the business of the church, although possessing a seminary education and what I hoped was a sincere love of God, I very much wanted to outsource the big decisions. So finding myself in this new world order, a Congregationalist community, was for me an exercise in self-awareness and trust. All this to say that if you are asking what it means to be a Congregationalist, I believe that first and foremost, it is to be part of group that demands that you own your faith

and requires you to ready yourself to take a position and be willing to compromise, for the good of the world. Congregationalism is no check the box system, this is a roll up your sleeves and get ready for Christ-inspired action.

I believe that Congregationalism carries with it a different level of responsibility than other denominations and certainly being a member of Plymouth is a different commitment than other affiliations. It is transcendent. I carry the belief, heavier in my heart each year, that we need each other, and are responsible to each other at Plymouth. Although we will not always get things right, together we do get things better. Ultimately, we believe that God is good and is for us and works through us. But this theological miracle is not an excuse to dial it in and assume good old God will save the day.

Congregationalism feels very messy because is it seeks to involve everyone –the type-A people, the annoying people, the loud people, the proud people, the holier than thou people, the late people, the patient people, the hurting people, the loving people. Oh so very messy, this priesthood of believers. But in this congregation, everyone’s gifts are required and desired. This Congregational structure demands that one show up, be willing to debate, to serve, to commit.

Plymouth, for all its messiness, offers us the chance to continue the centuries long story and to find out how together we might be the kind of people memorialized in stained glass. I used to puzzle over our sanctuary’s windows teaching of the Puritans and the founders of schools and abolitionists. Weren’t we to learn of the saints, the apostles, the trinity, as we sat daydreaming in church? Once again, I wanted to default to the “bosses.” But now these stained-glass ghosts feel like the fellow members

they are--members of the capital C Congregation; our distant relatives who harken to all of us, “Come on—work this faith, embrace this gift of one another-- and get busy seeking justice and expressing generosity in this world.” They did it and they didn’t even have the internet.

Being a Congregationalist is to be inspired to change the world because it is in our denominational DNA. But the Congregationalist does not go it alone. First, we as Congregationalists must look around and embrace each other, because it is together that we will be a bright light in this dim world. Congregate in love.

~ Hattie Bollerman