

~~WHAT CONGREGATIONALISM~~ PLYMOUTH MEANS TO ME

A moment of honesty: I can't answer the question I was asked to write on. I don't have much insight into other Congregational churches. I've only ever attended services at one other, when I was on the Search Committee for a new minister. We went like restaurant reviewers, undercover, to a Congregational Church in Massachusetts to see an applicant for the job in action. The church was beautiful, as you would expect: historic, white exterior, white steeple, plain clear glass windows. The embodiment of the Congregational esthetic. The pastor, not so much. We made an offer to Brett Younger. Brett, raised a Southern Baptist in a much different part of the country was the better fit for this Congregational church. The rest, as we say, is history.

History. I've done a bit of reading about Congregationalism since I've joined Plymouth. In particular, when I asked our previous Senior Minister, David Fisher, why my boys weren't learning any of the creeds that had been so important to my Lutheran upbringing. Apostle's Creed, Nicene Creed, nowhere to be found in the service or taught in Sunday School. That's when I learned that Congregationalism is not *creedal*. We do not have to attest that we all believe exactly the same thing. Plymouth is a covenant community. We promise

... with the Lord and one with another, and do bind ourselves in the presence of God, to walk together in all His ways, according as He is pleased to reveal Himself unto us in His blessed word of truth.

The language is a bit cumbersome and archaic. I have some issues with the Salem community that first made this pledge (witch-hunt, anyone?) but not with the sentiment expressed here. I promise to you, deeply, in the same

way I took my marriage vow, that I will walk with you in our journey toward a deeper understanding of God's truth. Each time we repeat these words to each other the simple beauty of that promise envelopes me in a profound and perfect peace.

As a Congregational Church, Plymouth "recognizes as sacred the freedom of individual members, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, in matters of conscience pertaining to worship, interpretation of Scripture and doctrine, and the right of private judgment in matters of personal conduct." (from Plymouth's Bylaws) I grew up with the image of solitary Martin Luther hiding out in Wartburg Castle throwing his ink well at the Devil. I grew up getting gold stars on a chart for memorizing creeds, commandments, an entire catechism. We memorized because there was no discussion, there was only one path to follow that led to an encounter with God.

It was hard to find a place for my adult self within that rigid framework. The church might support the church but it didn't support me, or my growing family. Where could we find a religious community that would respect my husband Chris's right to question? My right to examine? That would help us grow our children, and surround us with love?

Plymouth is a good fit for our family. A great fit, actually, like your favorite pair of shoes or your best pillow that cradles you softly to sleep each night. In a year with an inordinate amount of time spent sorting through the things in my life, Plymouth is the one that when I hold it close, in the words of Marie Kondo, sparks joy. Many of my friends have walked away from the faith and church of their youth, putting them out for Good Will to collect. Plymouth has met me at the gate in the middle of the night, lamps blazing, and welcomed me in.

Like the touchstone piece of Plymouth Rock in the Arcade, I come back to Plymouth again and again to brush up against my faith and to embrace my friends.

~ Beth Fleisher