

Sounds Like the Gospel to Me

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Celtic Service Reflection

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St. Stephen's Episcopal Church

The bishop will visit St. Stephen's next Sunday and he'll confirm 43 young people here, most of them current 9th graders, and he'll confirm a few adults, too. Four years ago I was one of those adults—conspicuous not only because I was older than the majority—some of them my students—but also because I was baptized that same day. Four years ago. In truth, though I think of it now as an important decision and a profound experience, it was for me an uncomfortably public display of something that had been, and still is, intensely private—this decision, this call to faith. Though I did feel the celebration of that day, I also felt self-conscious—not about my faith, but about how my faith had moved outward. Or maybe just my ego got a little in the way of my joy.

Anyway, my mother and I had some interesting conversations during that confirmation process. And they continue still. She sat in the pew that morning four years ago and watched me and she has asked a lot of great questions: about church, about confirmation and baptism, about communion. To this day, she will apologize sometimes. She'll say, "We should have taken you to church as a kid." She'll say, "I think we really missed the boat on religion." She'll say, "I just didn't know how to handle it; I didn't have a church experience of my own to guide me." And four years ago, I was just really glad she was there. I said something like, "It's totally fine, Mom. I wouldn't have wanted to go to church as a kid anyway. You did the right thing. I found it."

I've always been close to her, but since I became a mother myself, just six months ago, we're close now in a different way. I think there was some part of knowing her that was simply not available to me until I held my own baby in my arms. There are things you just cannot know until you know them.

Just a couple nights ago, I was telling her about the bishop coming and we started talking about the whole thing over again—my lack of a religious upbringing, her perceived failure. I say it again: "It is totally fine. I wouldn't have wanted to go anyway. You guys did the right thing. I found my church." But I want to say a lot more than that too: I want to say that it's even *more* than totally fine.

What I want to add is what I only now really get: she did not miss the boat on religion at all. And whatever I found, it's only because she showed me how and encouraged me to look. She, and my father too, taught me the gospel simply by being my parents. My kind-to-each-

other, long-married, ever-patient, tirelessly devoted parents. They showed me the best of religion without ever taking me to church and they are teaching me still: if God is love, then church is home. And if church is home, then we worshipped all the time.

My childhood was a paradise. My twin sister and I played basketball in our bare feet with our dad on the dirt court in the backyard until the bats came out. We made bouquets of weeds to give to my mother. We pulled our little sister around in a wagon. We played ping pong after dinner and we made up baton routines and dance routines and we had handstand contests and we played a game we called Annie Oakley which actually meant nothing more than walking around the yard dragging a rope and calling each other Annie and naming our imaginary horses. We watched TV in the basement while Mom let me play with her hair and practice how to braid and dad worked on making a model airplane and played records for us—Jackson Browne and the Allman Brothers and I'm sure it wasn't always as idyllic as it is in my memory, but in my memory it is perfect.

Sure, maybe my learning curve would not be so steep as an employee at a church if I had learned earlier about the Bible, or Communion, or how to pray. But the religion I had instead was—still is—religion enough. I love the church. And I love *this* church. But if I never attend another worship service, I will instead return to the example my parents still set. The rules of their house are as simple now as they were then: tell the truth, watch your attitude, look out for each other. Pretty good rules for all of us. Sounds like the gospel to me.

My husband and I have started talking about what religion will look like in our house, particularly as it involves our infant son. Josh, my husband, was not raised in church either and I think we both have some ambivalence about how hard to push it, when to push, if to push at all. We probably will not get it totally right no matter what we do, or don't do. We may actually get it totally wrong. But I pray that for whatever mistakes I make in raising a son, for whatever ways I am sure to fail, I pray that he come to know that our house is one of love, that God is real and God is here, that the rules are as simple as the truth, that he is the luckiest of all to have his grandparents, and that it is the greatest privilege of my life to be his mother.

If I inherited one fraction of the goodness my parents have, if I have learned enough of their religion of love to teach something of it to my own child, I think—thanks be to God—I think we might be all right.