

Good Lord, almighty, do I love being an Episcopalian! Yup, sure do. I love the way we worship. I love the way our churches look, and I love the way our churches smell. I love the way our people turn to God and to reason both. And I love the way that, no matter how I feel, church still happens. As a former evangelical once told me after they became one of us, “my relationship with God doesn’t depend on what kind of day I’m having.” I also really love the way being an Episcopalian lets me move in the world. I have to admit that when I get introduced as a priest, I’m tickled by the reactions. Some folks stiffen up, some brace themselves, and some can’t help but spill out their life stories. But if I get introduced as an Episcopal priest, the reactions are different. They change from all that churchy baggage to a different set: “oh, you’re an *Epistopal* priest? What’s that? Is that Christian?” or “Are y’all the gay ones?” or my personal favorite, “I don’t know what that means, but as long as you still love Jesus, you’re ok by me.”

Much as I love being “Epistopalian,” there’s really not a ton of folks that know what we’re about, if they even know we exist. Typically, Episcopalians make up around 2% of the population wherever they are, which isn’t all that much. But the way I carry myself knowing how right we’ve gotten all this Christianity stuff while everyone else, especially *those* Christians, have gotten it wrong, well, you’d think we were closer to 90. At least where I grew up, it always annoyed me to see small churches claim their way was the only right way, and that everyone else was wrong. There’s a statistic floating around that Christianity is made up of some 40,000 denominations world-wide. Now, you could certainly debate that figure, but in the town I grew up, with 10,000 people, there were 78 individual churches. It takes a whole lot of hubris to say you’re right and 39,999 other denominations or 77 other churches had it wrong. Either way, while I knew they were crazy for making that claim, I also knew the Episcopalians were quietly right all along. Funny how I missed the irony there.

But there’s one thing a lot of those *other* churches get right and sometimes us “Frozen Chosen” miss. And that’s the fun of all this. I have to give credit where credit’s due: at Bible Study last Thursday, we were having an in-depth and difficult conversation about suffering in the Christian world, and one of you brilliant people chimed in with the reminder that “there is joy in being a Christian, too.” I can’t tell you how much I needed to hear that, and based on the way the room changed, I’m guessing the rest of the crew needed to hear it, too.

It makes me think of my Grandma Mary who was always ready to go on a Sunday morning half an hour before it was time. She’d put on a baby blue dress, the same color every time but I swear she had a new baby blue dress every week. She’d check and recheck her stockings for runs and make sure none of her white hairs were out of place, and then she’d just beam for the entire rest of the day. Whether waiting on the couch for my uncle to swing by or riding in the front seat of her own car that he’d drive or resting in the pew for the two-hour long service, she’d sit with purse held in her lap and hands on her purse like a bunny intent and happy. And that same beaming smile she had before we left the house she still wore all the way back to the bucket of KFC chicken disguised as Ms. Thompson’s own secret family recipe. Sundays were a joy for her, always.

Or my Grandma Sue who had a more varied color palette and, though she was Baptist, she was a different flavor. She was a city Baptist, which meant their church had a swimming hole built in behind the pulpit. Grandma Sue’s Sunday mornings were more frantic, chasing unruly grandkids and failing to tame unruly curls falling on her forehead. But she loved Sundays, too. She used to say the only good Christians were the ones she saw on Sunday, and boy did she love those folks. They were the ones who’d come calling when no one else would, and they also loved knowing everyone else’s business. But when the needs of the world came to them, they leapt to it. Fried chicken showed up there, too, and everyone knew Ms. Thompson’s trick, but no one

complained because KFC ain't half bad but, now, if someone showed up with Popeye's, you'd ordain 'em on the spot.

I can think of a million stories of my family that have churches of various kinds woven in. Some of 'em are joyful, some are sad, some are just plain embarrassing, like the time I had to acolyte with my crush and proceeded to set her ponytail on fire. But most all of 'em have one thing in common. And no, it's not fried chicken. It's Christ. The one thing we can truly agree on, well maybe two if you count "not setting other people's hair on fire" as a common doctrine. The one thing we can truly agree on across the splintered body that is Christianity, the one thing is that the joys and the sufferings, the laughter, the pain, the exhaustion, the solace of life, the one thing we can all agree on is that we're all connected to each other through our God. And it's a joyful thing to have that body, spread thin as it is, linking us together.

If I'm honest, it's hard for me to express all those joys. I have a much easier time writing about the heavy stuff. Always have. Back in high school, after playing guitar for a friend, they asked if I knew any songs that weren't in a minor key. For whatever reason, that's how I'm wired. So it's been a beautiful thing to get reminded of the major key stuff, the joys and the lightness and the fun of being a part of this family. And it's just as easy to look at the ways another person goes about practicing their faith and sneer. Truth is, there are times I've taken a perverse joy in that sneering. But these days, especially of late, it just makes me sad. The division, the deterioration of love and relationship and joy that comes from being able to trust that our mutual commitment to God means something similar. Those are painful things to lose. And they're painful because we know what could be.

We know there's still baby blue wearing ladies eating fried chicken, and we know there's proper city ladies gossiping and we know there's new Episcopalians just trying to figure out what page we're on. And we know, through all those delights and the troubles, too, through all that, there is Christ. Would that the joy came so easily, would that we didn't need a reminder. But disunity and the exchange of Christianity for something weirdly nationalistic makes it tough to hold onto the joy of life in Christ. But y'all, we have got to. If Christianity can't keep joy and kindness and generosity and grace at the center of all we do, we're gonna have a bad time. What we do isn't about judging or controlling. What we do is about love. Above all it's about Christ. And with Christ, on our better days, it's about joy.