
Why I Still Go to Church

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You probably think you know why I still go to church . . . and you wouldn't be mistaken. I am a "professional" religious person, after all. My job is to hightail it out of bed early Sunday morning, don a stiff black shirt and collar that can look like some Nehru jacket gone horribly wrong, then lead prayers that seem irrelevant to ever increasing numbers of people (and not just those living in the Pacific Northwest). I do this almost every weekend. Why? Because it's my work, my life's calling. And I love it.

That's not the whole story, though, not by a long shot. To tell you more, I must return to my sophomore year in high school (for you, I will do this). It is a sweltering Sunday evening in late September and I am standing on the lawn of the small wood frame building that houses my church's youth program. Despite the heat, I have been out in the yard for a while, all by myself. I am feeling miserably self-conscious, thanks to a recent encounter with a Portuguese man o' war that has tattooed an angry red streak all the way down my left leg. I contemplate hiding in the bushes or sneaking across the street to the 7-11 for a grape slushy to kill time before my dad comes to pick me up. Just, then, though, one of our youth leaders bursts through the screen door and out onto the lawn, exclaiming:

Julia! I'm so glad to see you! I've been waiting all week to hear about your jellyfish attack!

I don't make it inside to youth group that night, for this woman—a marine biologist—and I spend the next hour or so on the front porch discussing the intricacies of sea life in the North Atlantic. Though I cannot name it at the time, I experience a rare form of grace during our conversation. A middle-aged mom—someone I'd avoid if I saw her from a distance at the grocery store—manages to break through my snarky, angsty teenage self-absorption to access within me something tender, reverent, engaged, and open. It is a strange and beautiful occurrence.

Fast forward many years to find me one June morning, now a middle-aged mom myself. My son is suffering a severe seizure that the paramedics cannot stop. The ambulance rushes away with him and my husband, while I follow in the car. At a long stoplight, I type a quick, desperate Facebook post asking for prayers. By the time I reach the hospital, dozens have responded. Who are these kind people? One is a man I ticked off with something I said during a recent sermon. Another is someone I knew in grad school—we haven't seen each other in years, but here she is now, telling me she has already lit a candle for our boy. Still others are virtual strangers who have since become colleagues and friends. When one of them brings our family Communion the next day, she slips me some lip balm and hand lotion, too. Hospital air is dry—she knows this, and she cares.

Writer Annie Dillard once suggested that, rather than offer worshippers coffee and donuts between services, churches ought to pass out life preservers. For we are all navigating the rough waters of human existence. Church is a place we can come for help in staying afloat. A place where we who have felt the sharp sting of life at sea can gather to bind up each other's wounds. It is not a perfect place. It can be tiresome and hypocritical. It can be petty and divisive. It can be ignorant, neglectful, even abusive. It can fail miserably at its most basic mission. Nonetheless, the Church has met me—and, I pray, you, too—in the midst of some incredibly strong currents and has held me up when I was sure I would sink. In life, in death; in joy, in sorrow; in triumph, in tragedy; in fallow times and in plenty; in natural disasters and in troubles of my own making, the Church has come. And so I go.
