

Douglas V.

I was raised in the Roman Catholic Church (as were many of my fellow parishioners—and for that matter many of my fellow Episcopalians). At one time in my earlier years, I had thought ordained ministry was for me and studied in a Roman Catholic seminary. Having made the realization that the church of my childhood was no longer a good match for me, I went through a rebellious period wherein I wanted nothing more to do with organized religion. Period. I shortly realized that while ordained ministry was not my calling at the time, I felt a strong calling to ministry of some sort. I began work in a large 1,400-family parish as music director on Saturday evenings and Sunday mornings and business manager during the rest of the week. One of my days off nearly thirteen years ago, I wandered unexplainably to a small Episcopal church in my neighborhood that I had never even noticed. I was met by the rector, warmly greeted, and given a brief tour, not only of the nave, but of the Episcopal Church. I was immediately intrigued. Shortly thereafter, I began work in a large, affluent Episcopal church.

When it's one's job to oversee the finances, stewardship, volunteers and communications in a church, one realizes that he is spending more time in church in a week than some spend in a year. Such was the case for me, and it led to what I now know was a rationalization: "I don't need to go to church to have a relationship with God." Finding community outside a church was just fine and taking Sundays as "me time" was fine, too. When my partner would go off to church on Saturday nights, I think I pretended to be happy having some time off. I was secretly longing to be by his side, **but** in a community we both could call home.

I began feeling a growing sense of longing to be more engaged in a community organized around at least some common goals, one of which being the care and love of one another. My partner had become increasingly ill-at-ease with the polity of the church of his childhood, and thus we were both poised to begin a "church search."

We "kissed a lot of frogs" in our quest for a church home in which we'd both feel comfortable, welcomed, energized and inspired for personal growth and thus service to others. Frankly, I was beginning to tire of sampling churches that either didn't seem to notice newcomers or didn't seem to want to acknowledge newcomers at the risk of growing, and thus giving up the close-knit fellowship already present with current longtime members. We were quietly welcomed at some churches, loudly ignored at others. We were not naïve, by any stretch, about our expectations of the Episcopal Church. We were not seeking only communities we thought would welcome an openly gay couple. We neither expected nor desired a community whose members were all of one mind.

We found St. Nicholas via the congregation's website and my curiosity was aroused. While the physical structure pictured and liturgy described was not what I thought I was after at the time, I immediately fell in love during the first service we attended (which, by the way was the Annual Children's Pageant).

Having only just sat down for the first time in the midst of those gathered, somehow I sensed my frog-kissing days were numbered if not over.

It now warms my heart to reflect upon the gifts that become available once one is open enough to receive them. You see, I had a long-held belief that I knew what I was seeking from a church. “High-church” was for me. Formal liturgy, expansive sanctuaries with high-flying buttresses. CD-quality organ and choir music. What I learned is that what I was truly seeking was God-centered relationship. What I really hungered for was community. What I thirsted for was the heart-warming sight of children prancing about the community gathered during the liturgy. What really fed me was the hugs and knowing smiles exchanged during the sign of peace.

I have gone from a strong desire to have Sundays off to genuinely never wanting to miss a Sunday with our family at St. Nicholas. Coffee hour (which I’ve spent most of my life dreading, being an introvert) is now a joy. My partner and I are proud to be part of a parish, which takes seriously the ministry of the baptized. I am thrilled to have found a community whose leader sees it as his job to equip members for their own priestly ministry. We are honored to have the chance through adult formation to get to know ourselves more fully that we might better use God-given gifts to better serve others.

I still believe that one needn’t go to church on Sunday to have a relationship with God. Only now I also believe that being a part of a church community deepens that relationship immeasurably. I find that a well-known line out of a song from Les Misérables often floats across my lips in song: “To love another person is to see the face of God.” I’ve been very fortunate thus far to have shared much love with my partner, my family and friends throughout my life. Lately, since discovering St. Nicholas, I seem to be noticing brand new facial features.