

the glory of true home, where hating your mother and father might actually make sense, given how short they, and we, fall. Why would a bunch of Christians stand in a cemetery remembering the life of a man who disdained their faith, a man who didn't even want to be mourned? I think it was—and in all our attempts at family-making, is—our way of saying: this is how it could be, this is how it should be, this is how it will be when Christ finally does return, and all our families are redeemed.

## 2

## Open the Doors and See All the People

*by Paula Carter*

When I was fourteen, our church, the Evangelical Free Church of Geneseo, split. About half of our church members left and went off to form their own church, and when that didn't work out, they went to other established churches. One Sunday they were there, and then, like the rapture, they were gone. I imagined these people wandering away from our church in a crowd. I could see them slowly traversing the soggy ground of the cornfield to the west of our small church, a field that also abutted the high school a mile away, which is where the group met for a few months, setting up in the gymnasium. When I imagine the split, I imagine the Harpels and the Darbys and the Junises all walking away with angry faces, raising their fists in the air like a mob.

I still don't know exactly why our church split. The split happened in the summer, the summer before my first year of high school. My impressions of it are vague, like my made-up mob. I have to ask my mother to fill in the details and remind me of the chronology.

What I do remember about the summer our church split is my junior high Sunday school class. Our teacher was a big man, funny and childish. He was young, probably in his mid-thirties, but that seemed ancient to those of us in his class who were still trying to

guess what high school would be like. He liked to goof around, joking with us and being silly, trying to get us to open up about our teenaged lives. The classroom was in the basement of the church, damp and chilly with painted cement brick walls and a cement floor covered by pieces of fraying gold carpet. I was always cold in the basement, wearing a skirt and thin hose, which I thought made me look more grown up.

One of the first things we would do is pray. Our teacher would take prayer requests. I always hated prayer requests. I felt obligated to have a request, like I was somehow not trusting God with my problems if I didn't. But at the same time, I felt annoyed with the other requests, which always seemed trivial and gossipy to me: "Pray for my brother as he drives back to college this afternoon." "Pray for my aunt's broken leg." "Pray for a friend of mine, whose name I'd rather not say, who is starting to get involved in some bad things." Everyone in the class knew each other well. We all went to the same school, knew each other's friends, and for the most part, had been in Sunday school classes together since we were small children. A prayer request about a "friend" started everyone guessing. It also allowed the person making the request to sit up straight and give knowing nods, to be the one with the inside scoop, the one who was in church and not doing those bad things. We all understood that we must silently disapprove of this friend—who was either not a Christian or had strayed.

After taking the requests, our teacher would dole them out. We all took one. Then we would pray, our teacher wrapping it up with an attempt to invoke the Spirit. Most of my Sunday school teachers were great at this: "I just want to praise God that I've been given this opportunity to be with these young people today. Guide our time together . . ." But my junior high teacher lacked inspiration. Sometimes he asked someone else to finish for him, or he ended safely by praising the beautiful day.

He was a new Christian, and to be honest, I'm not sure how he came to teach the junior high Sunday school class. He seemed far more bewildered by the Bible than we were. Often we would sit around discussing some vaguely spiritual topic, which might turn into a discussion about movies or teachers or friends. But at times he would try to put together serious lessons. For these lessons, it was

obvious he had worked hard and had a specific goal in mind, leading us toward it by force, if he had to.

Not long after I moved into high school, this Sunday school teacher left his wife and three small girls for another woman. He had been having an affair for some time, and when his wife found out, he left. He moved to a small town nearby. I don't know exactly what happened, or how it happened, but less than a year later, he committed suicide.

• • •

But before all that, before anyone began to look at him askance, I sat in his classroom and prayed, and next door the adult Sunday school met to discuss the future of our church. The Evangelical Free church is a democratically organized church. The doctrinal statement reads, "We believe that Jesus Christ is Lord and Head of the Church and that every local church has the right, under Christ, to decide and govern its own affairs." Theoretically, it is unlike hierarchical Christian denominations that receive instruction and direction from church authorities; each Evangelical Free church is considered an autonomous congregation. And because of the democratic structure, it seems to place an emphasis on the human aspect of the church. The Evangelical Free church appears to embrace its earthly base, realizing that a church *is* people.

One of the things that the Evangelical Free members debate and vote on is pastor selection, which is where the tear that ended up ripping our church in half first began. Our pastor left the year before to take a different job and a new pastor was commissioned, Pastor Rick. Soon after, an associate pastor was added, Pastor Scott. In the end, half the church preferred one and the other half preferred the other, each thinking their man should be the head pastor or perhaps the only pastor. So the church began to divide, one camp for Rick, one camp for Scott.

• • •

The Geneseo Evangelical Free Church advocates adult baptism, full body submersion. At the front of the church behind the pulpit there

is a false floor that can be removed to reveal a small pool, something like a hot tub. The pulpit can also be removed so that from the congregation there is a clear view of the tub. During baptismal services, candidates first stand in front of the tub and talk to the congregation, giving testimonials about how they came to God. They are dressed in white robes of light cotton, and most people wear their bathing suits underneath. After the testimonial the candidate walks to the tub, down its three steps, to the pastor who is waiting in the water. The pastor says some things and then dunks the person, raising them up like Jesus rose from the dead.

During their baptismal testimonies, time and time again, I watched people talk about the troubles and sins of their past and then about how God had made them new and whole, and how they had started on a new path. They told stories of drunkenness, lies, cheating, and abuse by others and by themselves. But, in the early morning sunlight, dressed in their white gowns, the possibility of sin seemed to have been extinguished. Their sins were expunged. Major catastrophes like cheating on your wife and leaving your family, could no longer happen, would no longer happen.

But, of course, they did, and they do.

It was confusing for me as a young adult moving from the world of childhood to the world of adulthood. Right and wrong were paramount. Those of us who were fourteen and fifteen and sixteen that summer were constantly being told about the dangers of lying, sex, gossip, drinking. We were hailed and rewarded when we avoided these vices by coming to an alternative post-school dance party or by taking a vow of chastity. Sin was to be warded off at every step using the sword of the Spirit, the Bible. And I was trying very hard to follow the rules. If I just kept heading down that devotional path, I could avoid sin and pain and all the things the adults around me regretted; in short, I could avoid being a human.

But I didn't want to avoid being human. I remember sitting outside church with my brother in my mom's Buick that summer, waiting for my mom to stop talking to people and come take us home. My brother would get the car key and put it in half a turn so the electric windows and radio worked. Ryan would sit in the driver's seat, and I'd sit in the passenger seat. We'd roll down the

windows and listen to Casey Kasem's American Top Forty. I'd take off my shoes, white flats, revealing that my white tights were stained brown on the bottom from the leather inside the shoe. We wouldn't talk much. We'd listen to Whitney Houston and Rod Stewart and watch the cars pull out of the parking lot until we were one of the few cars left. It felt good to be out in the day, the car hot from the sun, my brother and I hungry and ready for lunch, the afternoon and week ahead of us. It felt good to be in this confined space with my brother, both of us on the same side, kids listening to the radio after church, feeling slightly rebellious, feeling like kids.

• • •

I think my brother was already disillusioned with our church. Two years earlier he had been a part of a weekly teenage boys Bible study led by the man who had served as interim pastor before Pastor Rick. Ryan was a freshman in high school and had become friends with some of the older guys in the group, which I think made him feel cool. After Ryan had been a part of the group for about a year, the interim pastor left our church. It was discovered that he had done something inappropriate with one of the boys in the group. What or to what extent I never found out. The man and his wife left Geneseo and moved to California. The teen group broke up. I've never talked to my brother about the incident, but I think more than anything he was hurt: his trust had been betrayed. He was just coming into his own sexuality, and I'm sure the thought of this man, whom he had trusted, violating someone he knew was shocking, perhaps terrifying. I have an image in my mind of my brother's face, pale and grave, and I always link that image to this time, to this event. The image contains a kind of setting of the jaw, reflecting a setting of the will and mind.

The scandal was shocking. Yet it seems this sort of thing happens again and again in churches. The pastor of a friend of mine left his wife for the youth leader in the church. The pastor and his wife had two small children who both have a rare disease, making them difficult to care for, and he just left one night, without any warning. Another friend of mine learned that her youth leaders were having

an affair with each other. The same struggles come up over and over, in every church, in every era. Take for example the church split. At the very opening of his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul says "It has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas,' or 'I belong to Christ.'" How much does this echo my own church's split: one says "I belong to Rick," another "I belong to Scott."

I don't think those outside of the church are ever as shocked as those in it. For those outside the church, it is almost expected or inevitable. It is the black side of the black and white, and there can't be one without the other, the flesh and the spirit, the good and the bad. Of course, in a secular sphere, such as television, one sees almost the opposite extreme—everyone will eventually cheat on their spouse, steal from their place of work, betray their friends. These things are to be expected. But it seems to me that both extremes are unnatural. We are human: we are black and white, we are flesh and spirit, we are good and bad.

• • •

When I think of church when I was a little girl, I picture sitting next to my mother during the service, leaning against her, her breath soft and warm as she asks me if I want a piece of candy. She pulls from her purse a small change pouch that holds mints, butterscotches, and cinnamon Trident gum. I take the butterscotch, which tastes like the cinnamon gum, having been kept in close quarters for so long. The butterscotch is slightly stale, and its outer coating is no longer hard. When I was a child, church was about stale candy and my mother; it was about the smell of the church basement and the gold carpet in the narthex. It is only as I aged that religion and God became ideas around which I felt I needed to organize my life and politics.

Church is translated from the Greek word *ecclesia*, which means assembly. It makes me think of the child's nursery rhyme where you clasp your hands together, fingers in, knuckles out, and say "Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the doors and see all the people," pointing your index fingers to make a steeple, then opening

your hands to see all the people. All those wiggling fingers seem an accurate image to represent what church felt like for me as a child—walking into our church foyer with everyone towering above me talking and shaking hands, tall, tall Carl Brinkman bending down at the waist to tease me, Pat Hemminger in her wheelchair taking my hand in her own, so soft and delicate.

It is interesting to think about how this changes, how we grow up and the impression of church, of growing up in the church, shifts. For me, the path twists and turns during the times of turmoil in our church. I began to recognize the gap between what people were asking of me and what they were able to do themselves. The adults around me were only human, a bunch of wiggling, writhing fingers, humans trying to make it through, searching for the right path, wanting to be good people, wanting me to have a happy life, scared of pain and sin, scared of themselves and me and our shared humanity.

• • •

The church split brought out the worst in people—petty gossip and rumors, yelling and arguing during congregational meetings, storming out in a huff. In my mind, I lump the split together with my Sunday school teacher's suicide and the interim pastor's scandal. At first I thought they all happened close to the same time, but when I look back on the timeline I see that one happened a few years before, another a few years after. Why do I lump them all together? I'm not sure exactly, but I suppose it has to do with how each incident reinforced the imperfection and frailty of church people. Through each of these incidents, I realized that the people of the church were not able to live up to the standards they were asking me to live up to. At first this made me angry, but now it makes me sad. I worry that people who grow up in the church learn to deny their own humanity.

My mother talks confidently about the split now, over ten years later, able to posit the group that followed Scott as the "wrong" group and the group that stayed as "right." On the phone with my mother, I press her, saying that I thought she was more confused at the time of the split, and she says that yes, she was. She admits then that many of the people who were thinking of leaving were her

friends. She tells me about how the week before Scott's last Sunday at church, someone came to the house in the evening to explain to her that a group had decided not to show up on Sunday and to leave the church for good. The woman tried to convince my mother to go with them. She spills out the names of the families that left our church in the split. They are names that I connect with my very earliest memories: the Tomshecks, the Junises, the Palmatiers. These were the founding members of the church, the people who had first guided my mother in her walk with God. For me, they are people I have not thought of in years, but suddenly as my mother says their names I see them before me: I kissed Josh Tomsheck when I was in the second grade, and Judy Junis taught me how to spin wool when we visited her house for a Super Bowl party. Just to hear my mother say these names is painful. I realize that these people not only walked out on the church, they walked out on our lives as well.

A church split. It is such a violent word, *split*. I see a piece of wood axed in half or the curtain of the temple torn in two. My aunt and uncle recently went through a church split—for many of the same reasons our church split: mainly disagreements about the direction of the church, the leadership of the church, and which members held the most power. They had raised their daughters in that church and had been extremely active in it, so it surprised me when they left. When they talk about the split, it is as if they experienced some kind of trauma—there is pain and bitterness and sadness. My cousin, Danna, is leaving her church, along with many of its other members, because the church lost its pastor and has been unable to replace him with someone Danna and her husband respond to. So off the members go, trudging over that cornfield of my daydream, trying to find a new home.

• • •

Now, when I am home, I accompany my mother to church. I recognize some of the faces, people who went through the split and stayed, along with my mother. But many of the members are new, people who joined the church after I left for college. Even the pastor is new; Rick has taken a post in New Jersey at a larger evangelical

church. The new pastor is nothing like Rick, and I have to say I don't like him half as well, but the congregation seems to approve. But that doesn't mean all is settled in the church community. My mother still leads music, and recently there was a scandal because half of the congregation wanted to hire a full-time music leader, and the other half wanted to keep it on a weekly volunteer basis. The man they wanted to hire was a member of the church, and when he wasn't voted in, he left the church, along with his supporters.

It is hard for me even now to reconcile the expectations of church and the reality of being alive. Not long ago I was shopping with my mother and we went out to lunch together. Sitting at another table right across from us were two women who go to her church. I didn't recognize either of them; my mother couldn't remember their names. It was a Mexican restaurant, and we had been out shopping. I suggested to my mother that we should get margaritas, her favorite mixed drink. She leaned over and quietly explained that she would rather not, not in front of the ladies from church. Even my mother has a secret side.

I asked my brother about growing up in our church and what that had been like for him. He said, "I never really felt like I fit in at that church. I felt like everyone was always being fake-nice to each other on Sunday morning. I really didn't feel like they were my friends; they were just people to greet on Sunday. I found out after I left Geneseo that there are churches that are more relaxed than our church." He is now married to a woman who was raised Catholic. They had a huge wedding in her hometown Catholic church. They just had a baby girl, and I wonder if they will raise her in a church.

I am still wondering what it means to be myself and be spiritual. Sometimes I try to pray, late at night when I am unable to sleep, my bed hot from my body and me tossing and turning. It is hard not to pray in a rehearsed way, and I can feel myself perform a routine even in my most desperate moments: "Oh Lord, please help me do X or feel Y." So I try to sink back into myself, to a self that is unaware of church and religion, to a more primal self. I imagine God as the night sky, not a man or even a person, and then I try just to be me, to be real, to experience my humanity with God as a witness.