

WHAT CONGREGATIONALISM MEANS TO ME

Congregationalism to me is Plymouth Church. I was baptized there, went to Sunday School there, sang in the children's choir, got confirmed, and even got married there. And now my son has also been baptized there, continuing the cycle. Some people have remained constant that whole time, and new faces have become part of the fabric of the church. Plymouth is a community I know is always there.

When I was little, I thought nearly everyone at church came from Congregationalist backgrounds, but I have learned over time that many people at Plymouth were not necessarily raised Congregationalist. So it seems that being a Congregationalist would include being open and accepting of others, and being open to change and evolution, while still maintaining a sense of being down to Earth, and an understanding that we are all people of equal standing before God.

I have always thought of Thanksgiving as a religious holiday. Not a biblical one, but with religious origins nonetheless. Probably because of Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims, a piece of Plymouth Rock in the arcade, and my favorite hymn, Come Ye Thankful People Come. It is a holiday thanking God for the goodness in our lives, and the optimism of being thankful for positive things. It was not until probably during or after college that I realized not everyone sees it that way. Studying abroad in Vienna, Austria, we all went around the Thanksgiving table saying something we were grateful for, and one girl said, "rub a dub dub, thanks for the grub." A few years later, while working in Oxford, England, I hosted a Thanksgiving dinner, where the only other American attending did not even wait to say grace. I don't say grace at every meal, but of all days in the year to say grace, Thanksgiving would certainly be one of them to me.

Now, in all fairness, I have to admit that I have rarely been to any churches other than Congregational churches. Once or twice I went to my grandmother's Congregational church in New Jersey. And in high school and college in New England, I sought out Congregational churches when I felt moved to attend, mostly around holidays.

Theoretically there are differences between Congregationalism and other Protestant denominations, but I could not tell you what all those nuances are, nor how worship differs. In England I went to a few Anglican churches, and was struck by how similar the services seemed compared to Plymouth. I went to evensong in Oxford sometimes, which was very pretty and relaxing, but more like a concert than a service. Christmas Eve mass at St. Stephens Cathedral in Vienna was a sight to see. I have also been to a scattering of other types of churches, mostly with a service that seems more ostentatious, or a modern service not to my taste, and usually small congregations.

So what is Congregationalism to me? It is being Christian, straight-forward, with no fuss. It is a grounded way of worship and living. It is a desire to do good, to be good, kind, caring, and humble, with a confidence that it is okay to struggle with what it means to be Christian. It is okay to be comfortable with where you are at with your understanding, or to strive for further understanding. It is an acceptance of each other, all interpreting the Bible ourselves and what it means to be a Christian, recognizing that we are each at different places along the yardstick in our own faith and where we want to be, and in our understanding of what is most important to us.

~Cecily Goodrich