

## **WHAT CONGREGATIONALISM MEANS TO ME: A LIFE-LONG COMMITMENT TO PLYMOUTH CHURCH**

As far back as I can recall, and at every stage of my life, I remember Plymouth. Some of my earliest and fondest memories are of events that took place in the elegant, classically-inspired buildings on Plymouth's grounds. Aside from my home life, Plymouth was the center of my world. I remember my first Sunday school class in a room that had a mural depicting Noah's ark. I was fascinated by the colorful animals marching two by two around the four walls to the waiting ark at the back of the room. We sat listening to Bible stories while feasting on apple juice and Oreo cookies. I remember singing in the Junior Choir where I was a frequent soloist. I still remember all the lyrics of my role as the donkey who "... carried his mother uphill and down..." in the children's nativity carol. The treasured books of Biblical stories we received as annual Christmas gifts have been in my "library" throughout the years. I just recently mailed them off to my grandnieces.

As time went by, I became one of the "official" Plymouth baby-sitters. My favorite job was taking care of my Sunday school teacher's son. He always asked for a banana split and I was sure to make two. I remember the Yankee Fair at which I would always find treasures. I still have the tiny Christmas stocking I bought the year my youngest brother was born. It hangs on my tree every year. I was filled with the mysticism of the Maundy Thursday service with the beautiful white rose that was handed to us on our way out and loved dressing up in a new outfit, complete with a fancy hat, on Easter Sunday. In my confirmation year we formed a neighborhood youth group that would gather to play ten pins on cold winter Saturdays in the warm interior of the bowling alley. And I remember the navy blue dress with an ecru collar that I wore at my first dance held in the "75 Room" where we got to dance with boys.

Although the concept of Congregationalism was not clearly formed in my mind, I knew it was different from the religions of three of my neighborhood friends. In the summer months I would walk my Catholic friend to confession and stand at the doorway of the sumptuous Assumption Church on Cranberry Street and watch her go into the booth with a lace doily on her head. It didn't take long: we were thirteen - she had nothing to confess. My second friend described herself as being culturally Jewish. I was very curious about Judaic traditions and asked her mother so many questions that the family hosted a Hanukkah dinner for me complete with candle lighting. It was their first. My third friend was a Unitarian who attended the stately stone church on Pierrepont Street. It was considered the "cool" church because they got to celebrate every holiday - Christmas, Passover, Diwali... I believe they still do.

Many years later, I have a better idea of what it is to be a Congregationalist and in the last year and a half that I have spent doing research on the stained glass windows in the sanctuary, I have encountered many of the Pilgrims, Puritans and early Congregationalists who settled New England and beyond. Their form of Congregationalism was a bitter pill to swallow. God was a wrathful God, jealous, vengeful and relentless in his cruelty. It was Henry Ward Beecher who helped promulgate the image of a loving God, a compassionate God, a patient, and forgiving God, the one who sent us the epitome of human existence in his Son, the very embodiment of love. I consider myself blessed to be a Beecher Congregationalist, a Plymouth Congregationalist where former adherents of other faiths can feel at home, feel accepted, and feel loved. What keeps us together are the two greatest commandments: our love of God and our love for one another. And now, having entered my "extended middle age," serving on the History Ministry with my husband and dear friends, anticipating the joy of returning to choir, doing research on the sanctuary's glorious stained glass windows, and attending worship service, albeit remotely, I find that Plymouth is still at the center of my world.

~ Valerie Velazquez de Louzonis