

This I believe.

When I come to a door and others are behind me, I should hold it open. Not just for one, but for so long as others need to come through.

My father, my mother, and my grandfather all told me that. As a little boy it felt good to struggle to pull open the heavy door to the Sunday School building at our church and hold it for others.

Inside that building, I was taught and came to believe that it was more than the physical doors I was to hold open. The teaching often came from the telling of stories

The church is in Washington DC, built in the 1860s, where we heard old stories regularly. There was the story of a Sunday in November 1911 when the right hand of fellowship was to be given to those who had joined the church in the past month. In the row stood Charles Evans Hughes, former governor of New York, former Secretary of State, newly named a justice of the United States Supreme Court.

In the row also - a man from the neighborhood, Won Lee, who worked in a laundry. Dr. Samuel Harrison Green, pastor there for 30 years, looked at them both and then told the new members and congregation that "at the foot of the Cross, the ground is level." This I believe, and while that ground is level – I must help the others journeying to that ground.

Working on this essay, I found myself on the NPR website reading some of the original 1950s essays. I thought about our journey in faith as I read an essay by a Chicago woman, Marty Mann. She wrote of the spiritual life and what it had meant in her battle with addiction. "Trying to help my fellow men is one of the straightest roads to spiritual growth," she said. "It is a road everyone can take. One doesn't have to be beautiful or gifted, or rich or powerful, in order to offer a helping hand to one's fellow sufferers. And I believe that one can walk with God by doing just that."

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4645728>

In our walk with God, in the late 1970s Terri and I attended a newly formed mission parish, St. Andrews of Holts Summit Missouri. We used the village rec center hall for services while we raised money to build. One Sunday after church I was reading at home when our daughter Bridget –then maybe 4 years old, asked if she could see “God in the box.” It took me a moment but then I knew what she meant. I opened a closet, took out a 4 by 2 foot wooden box and opened it. Inside was a large carved wood crucifix Father Pat Daley had brought back from a trip home to Ireland. It was our month to keep the crucifix and bring it to the hall each Sunday. Someone else brought the hymnals, someone else the small folding table that was the altar. Someone came early to set up the folding chairs. Bridget looked at “God in the box” that day and was satisfied.

When St. Andrews built a building a few years later– no sanctuary was built at first – instead a multi purpose hall that had no pews. There were 450 folding chairs and after the Sunday service – the congregation stood as one, and folded and stacked the chairs along the walls. The altar rolled back into an alcove, the crucifix taken down and secured in the alcove. Coffee was served, doughnuts eaten (nowhere near as good as Louie’s); kids ran and played or shot baskets...because in lieu of side altars there were basketball hoops.

Father Daley and his successors reminded us often that when we folded those chairs we were to remember that the hall was not the church – we were. God was not in a box and we were to be the church in the world. That story endures for me because it is what I believe.

In the same moment I also believe I am obliged to help support the physical, organized church; including what we must do to conserve and preserve historic structures – those of stone and plaster and those of form and tradition, song or the breaking of bread while adapting them so they can survive.

Growing up in that old German Gothic style Baptist church I would sometimes run my hand over the wood carving at the end of the pew as we sat, on the best of days my Dad's arm would be around me, and the building was alive.

Part of my feeling of being home here from the first day was how this space looks, the very feel of the wood of the pews. But this I continue to believe – God is not in this box except when we are here and open to Him. And when the light is carried out and Seth walks to the back and down the stairs, I must stand up and try my best to take the church out with me in my heart and hands and share it and show it and live it ...with family, neighbors, colleagues – with all those fellow sufferers struggling along the way.

But I get to have a cup of coffee and a doughnut hole too.

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