

Personal Faith Journey
Shannon Smythe

“Jesus loves me! This I know, for the Bible tells me so.” From my earliest days as a child of the church and daughter of a non-denominational pastor, the truth of these words always managed to ground me in the goodness of God. Childhood faith came easily to me. Through the many hours spent at the church each week, in the Christian elementary school I attended, and so many relationships forged in our church community, I experienced not only a warm sense of the body of Christ but also a natural sense of personal faith as integrated into all aspects of life. Seen from another angle, my Christian upbringing was sheltered, legalistic, and fundamentalist.

In my teenage years, I was both earnest and dogmatic in my faith beliefs. Youth group talks, continually repeating the “don’t drink, do drugs, or have sex” motif, left much to be desired. Sitting through “revival-type” services, I felt awkwardly out of place, having not deviated from my commitment to live out my faith, which I had publicly proclaimed when I was baptized as a sixth grader. My faith grew through my involvement as the flutist on my church’s worship team and through mentorship from a woman in our church who discipled me and a small group of high school young women. Still, though I could not have articulated it, I longed for a faith not set in such stark opposition from the “secular” education I was receiving in my public-school setting. Secretly, I was anxious because God seemed both distant and continually disappointed in me. Nevertheless, I continued to strive, in my faith, to be good, better, the best, yet always found reason to be disappointed in myself.

At my Christian liberal arts college, I found myself learning about God in entirely new ways. I found myself “surprised by joy” as I was reintroduced to the triune God of abounding grace and self-giving love. Old gospel truths came alive as if for the first time as I immersed myself in the theological and devotional classics and worship and service opportunities. My genuine “fire for God” culminated in a strong sense of call to become a theology major, in the hopes of pursuing graduate work and becoming a theology professor. Sadly, my own budding vocational identity came smack up against the limits of my faith upbringing. My parents told me, in no uncertain terms, that as a woman, I could not teach theology or bible to men.

Seemingly running away from the stifling conservatism and control of my parents, I attended seminary in New Jersey. The exposure to a more progressive Christianity on the East Coast, strong connection to a mainline denomination, and opportunity to immerse myself in the innovative Reformed theology of Karl Barth all hit me like a breath of fresh air. During this time, I found a redeeming way to reconnect to the body of Christ through membership in the PC(USA). At the same time, I was nurtured in my gifts and calling to theological education through mentorship by ordained women pastors. Finally, the evangelical roots still at the core of my faith identity stretched in ways that allowed me to embrace and integrate ecumenical gifts, liturgical practices, and social justice causes as my own.

Throughout my adult life, it has been a joy to engage with my spouse and son in living an embodied life of discipleship as a family. Celebrating the Lord’s Supper, studying scripture, spiritual direction, contemplative prayer, community organizing and working for racial and economic justice are all parts of the inward and outward expressions of my faith. I am so grateful that my faith journey has never happened in isolation but always as part of a larger whole, namely the various communities of faith in which I have joyfully and actively participated, as we together join in God’s initiating kingdom work of healing, liberation, and restoration. Having recently moved into full-time, ordained congregational ministry, I have been grateful to discover aspects of my pastoral identity and giftings that I resisted living fully into, out of fear, for many years. I am newly seeking to grow in contemplative Christian leadership practices of awareness and connectedness, that I might more fully take on the mind of Christ and live from a place of recognizing God’s indwelling in me and indeed, in all people.