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The ones who were the face of Christ for me

Jana Marguerite Bennett Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Feb. 12, 2010

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I was nearly 20 when I left the Methodist church of my childhood. My maternal great-grandfather was a circuit rider, one of the itinerant preachers who brought Methodism to Texas. I grew up less than a block from church, and I spent every Sunday there: first Sunday School, then the worship service, and then home for dinner. After dinner I was back for youth group and the evening service. Until I met my husband, I had never dated a boy outside my church.

In the summers I went to visit my father?s Southern Baptist family in the small town where I was born. I looked forward to the two-week vacation Bible school and the nightly tent revivals. My favorite evangelist was an old blind man who preached a railroad sermon. The tracks on the road to hell, he thundered, were a wide gauge, but the tracks on the road to heaven were narrow, and not all our cars were going to make the journey. He stayed on the narrow way by never dancing. ?I never needed a dance floor or a honky-tonk band to get my arms around my wife.?

The tent filled with moths clustered around the strings of electric bulbs as he bade us, like the moths seeking the light, to come forward and be saved. I went down to the front as often as my grandmother would al-low. One night, she grabbed my hand and pulled me back onto the metal folding chair. ?You are saved,? she hissed. ?Now, sit down.?

My mother told me years later that Ma-Maw was worried I would be stepped on or knocked over ?by some drunk cowboy from Silverton? who, in his haste to get right with Jesus, wouldn?t notice a small, kneeling child.

This is a part of my life my children never witnessed. They are Roman Catholics and they forget that I was ever not one as well. When my oldest daughter interned with the Frontier Nurses in Hyden, Ky., I went to visit her. She had grown close to a woman who worshiped every Sunday at the Hurt?s Creek Church of Christ. Elisabeth warned me that the service would seem strange. She wanted me to be prepared for an unsettling experience. We went in. We opened our hymnals and began to sing. ?Up from the grave he arose,? I sang out, ?with a mighty

triumph o?er His foes.?

Elisabeth looked at me, surprised. ?You know this hymn?? she whispered.

?You could wake me from a dead sleep,? I whispered back, ?and I could sing all the verses.?

My children know all the verses to ?On Eagle?s Wings,? but I rocked them to sleep with ?Softly and Tenderly,? ?Abide with Me? and ?Standing on the Promises.? I was glad to sing with the men and women of the Hurt?s Creek Church of Christ. The music took me to my childhood home and reminded me of all that I miss the most of those days and that place.

I was still a child when I left home, and I left home in many ways, becoming the first Catholic on either side of my family for as far back as anyone can remember. Surely some of them thought I had switched onto to a dangerously wide-gauge track.

There was no anger in my leaving, and certainly little doctrinal consideration. I had, in the way of the young, fallen in love: with my husband and with the liturgy. I remember hearing the eucharistic prayer for the first time and thinking that I had always been walking towards these words. But I carry with me still the pang of leaving the ones who formed me in faith and who were, from my earliest days, the face of Christ ever before me.

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