

Sunday morning, so help me, God

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I seldom invite friends to come to church with me and, after Sunday's morning service that was so deeply moving, I don't know why. If you knew a great bakery, you'd tell people. If you read a great book, you wouldn't keep it a secret. But off I truck to the West Side of Manhattan and in the big door past the greeters, drop my two cents in the offering plate, head altarward, stop at my pew, genuflect and bow, and take my seat.



The genuflection disturbs my fundamentalist ancestors. I can hear them mutter, "Oh please, not that again." Genuflection they regard as Catholic, papist, alien to the pure faith, and my Anglican church they consider decaffeinated Catholicism, and though I love my ancestors, I tell them to shove off. I know my own heart. This is my home.

I glance at the bulletin and see that I am going to weep this morning because Brother John the organist has chosen my mother's favorite hymn, "It Is Well With My Soul," for a Communion hymn. John has brought up our congregation to be a singing congregation; he does this by playing softly and tenderly and relaxing the tempo.

Sometimes we sound rather magnificent. Such as in the opening hymn, acolytes processing, candles in hand, the deacons and clergy, all of them women, and we sing "Trust and Obey" at full volume, even I who am neither trustworthy nor obedient.



We acknowledge God from whom no secrets are hid, we recite the Creed, and we acknowledge that we have opposed God's will in our lives. We are absolved and turn to the people around us, blessing them, and we go forward for Communion, and the Communion hymn reduces me to rubble:



*Lord, lift me up, and let me stand
By faith on heaven's tableland,
A higher plane than I have found.
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.*

My voice shakes and I feel tears on my cheeks, asking my Creator to raise me above the clutter and the cross-talk, the chit-chat, the crapola, and face the heavenly eternal, and accept the unbelievable fact of the faith, that God gave Himself to suffer humiliation and death for our sins. We all do this together. It isn't a show, we don't come to admire somebody's talent and wit, we are joined in one body for each other's sustenance and inspiration.

The Gospel this morning is one I've heard a hundred times, "Do unto others as you wish the bastards would do unto you," and this is no piece of cake. It says: *Love your enemy, bless those who curse you. If someone takes your coat, let them have your shirt too. Do not judge, do not condemn.* What the hell? I do not love my enemy. He is Putin's patsy and so we should let him take Ukraine and let him have Poland and Sweden too? I don't think so. But this apparently is what Jesus said, that I should love the unelected Nazi who is cutting American aid to starving people in Africa.

So I'll take that home and wrestle with it for a while. I have confessed my sins as a poor father, a distracted husband, an absentee citizen, and now I recognize my ignorance of the Golden Rule, but then the organ sweeps us into "It Is Well With My Soul" and I weep openly while singing bass:

*When peace like a river attendeth my way
And sorrows like sea billows roll,
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

And I see my mother, Grace, at the piano in the living room and her six children singing the words. She canned dozens of quarts of stewed tomatoes, green beans, apple sauce, from the garden, and she fixed pot roast and she vacuumed and changed the beds, she laughed at my jokes, and she also played the piano. It's her song.

I listen to the postlude and shake hands with the rector, thank John for the hymns: it's not easy to make me weep, I am not that sort of sensitive male, I'm a comedian, this is the work that God has sent me out into the world to do, and I am grateful for the commission. I walked into church thinking about deadlines and the news and my aged ailing pals and I walk out into the sunshine, feeling shaken, raised up, grateful for the love of God and the people around me. I wish you'd come with me sometime.