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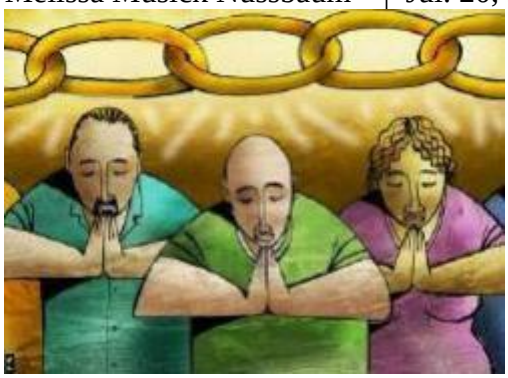
Sticking with an imperfect (church) fit

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | Jul. 20, 2009



Paul Lachine

Parish Life

In his rule, St. Benedict describes one of the decrees of monastic life. The monk "is to promise, before God and his saints to be stable" -- that is, to settle in a place, one place, for life. It is not an assumption we share. Indeed, the notion of a grown man still living in the house where he was born conjures images of instability, mental and emotional. We imagine Boo Radley, afraid of the world beyond his porch.

Our world is shaped and defined not by stability of place, but by mobility and its partner, consumer choice. The premise of consumer choice is that, somewhere, the perfect fit between product and purchaser exists. It is the responsibility of the producer to offer it, the responsibility of the purchaser to find it. Shop till you drop.

American churchgoers no longer prize stability of place in worship any more than we prize stability of place in the rest of our lives. Accordingly, there is a body of literature on leaving one church and finding another. Little is written about choosing to stay, as sticking with an uncomfortable fit is never thought wise in a consumer culture.

In the books on religious mobility the consumerist tone prevails. The words are those of the marketplace and the dressing room. Church shoppers, like shoe shoppers, speak of the "right fit." Fit is individual, tailored to the person, to the self. And anything less than the right fit is unacceptable. "We will," we say, "take our business elsewhere. We'll vote with our feet. And with our checkbooks."

But what if, in the home-stitched and misshapen life of community, it turns out there is no perfect fit? Indeed, for long stretches of time, no fit at all? I have been married for 35 years. I raised five children. I confess that the fit of family life is often that of a too-tight pair of shoes, rubbing my feet raw and blistering my flesh.

But, then, I didn't buy my family. Children come to us as darling and disruptive strangers, gifts to be sure, but not purchases. If I were ordering a child, I would specify less attitude and independence, along with an operating system perfectly in sync with mine. I would check and re-check the SKU number, making sure I got the style and model just right for me.

And if it can be said that I chose my husband, I did so under the flattering light of what he calls "the fraud of courtship." We were young, beautiful and strong. We were our best selves before one another. We still had the refuge of our childhood homes in which to be difficult and sullen, picking fights for the nasty pleasure of it. The good night on the porch and the reluctantly shut door is enchanting. There is little like a shared bathroom to disenchant.

Let me put it this way: If we were overcoats, we'd have been tossed in the Goodwill bin long ago.

But we learned that neither of us is perfect, so perfection ceased to be a factor. We set about building a household in which people could grow and learn and forgive and be forgiven, a place where we were, and are, known to one another. And the only way for that to happen was for us to stay, together, in one place, in and out of seasons, weathering the flowering and the falling and the flowering again of affections. Stability makes community possible.

A parish is a community made up of the *ecclesiolae* -- the little churches -- that are our homes. Stability in the parish is as necessary as stability in the home. Like the home, the parish needs to be a place where brothers and sisters can be formed together, under one roof, sitting at one table, hearing family stories told again and again. But stability in parish life, as in married life, means giving up the hope of perfection.

(Notice I said "perfection," not "safety." The question of leaving a life-threatening situation -- in home or out -- is another discussion entirely. To stay where one is being killed is not stability but suicide. But most people don't flee murderous pastors any more than most divorcing spouses leave murderous partners. We flee boredom and disappointment, the sense of failed expectation when a purchase neither looks nor performs as it did in the ad.)

We have been members of our parish since we moved to town 27 years ago. We have a few grim tales to tell, some of them regarding over- or under- or self-involved clergy. Some of them are stories of parishioners who have transformed leaving in a snit into an art form. But we have many more glorious tales to tell: of the faithful woman offering us the blood of Christ as her hair fell out and her flesh withered. The cancer was claiming her body, cell by cell, but the Holy Spirit within her grew ever stronger. We remember Fr. Ted, who never had a dollar in his pocket because he gave to everyone who asked. We have learned that pastors come and go; the assembly remains. Sunday after Sunday, year after year we are all of us in the church, and it is in these faces we find strength. I think of the Sundays when it is only the visible sign of others' faithfulness keeping me, holding me fast.

Stability allows parish memory. Think this was bad? Let me tell you about the day the police shot a homeless man in the bathroom as Mass was being celebrated.

Parish memory is an antidote to nostalgia. There was never a golden age when we prayed without ceasing, cared for the poor without complaining and shunned gossip. There was never a time when our priests were all attentive and wise in the confessional, eloquent yet brief at the ambo and saints on the streets. Lay and clergy, they were like us, humans who try -- and fail -- to love God and their neighbors.

Parish memory is an antidote to "mall syndrome," the idea that just around the food court and past the Victoria's Secret lays the secret of our happiness, the perfect fit. Parishioners who leave one failing church to join a parish that appears to be ascending will discover the lead beneath the gold soon enough.

Though I'm sure they're out there, I've never met a long-married couple who wished they had divorced. Maybe when John lost his job they say, or during the years Jane was drinking, for those were bad days. But they knew, on some level perhaps too deep for words, that neither they nor their marriage were consumer items to be

returned for imperfection. And, having come through the fire together -- in part *because* they came through the fire and they did it together -- they found it wasn't they who made the marriage; it was faithfulness to the marriage that made them: a couple, a household, a family. And in the hard work of fidelity, they have found something better than customer satisfaction. They have found joy.

[Melissa Musick Nussbaum is coauthor of *Free to Leave, Free to Stay: Fruits of the Spirit and Church Choice* to be published in this fall by Cascade Press.]

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