
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Redemption

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Anna,

Thank you for the article about children of secular families being as nice as children of religious families. It's good news. You're right, though, it prompts a question.

What's the point of going to church, if those who do aren't any nicer than those who don't?

It's fair to expect people going to church to be nice to other people. It's hard to see the value in a faith that doesn't have any effect on the way people treat each other. The proof of the pudding is in the eating.

It's complicated, though, when you compare those who go to church and those who don't. People move in and out of these groups, and they're rarely so rooted in one that they don't feel the pressure of the other. It's not unusual, for example, for people to say they believe in God, but don't go to church, while others say they go to church, but don't believe in God.

It's even more complicated when you realize that going to church isn't about learning how to be nice. It's not about improvement – like learning how to run faster. It's about redemption – being given the gift of flight.

Vaclav Havel, a writer and human rights advocate who ultimately became President of Czechoslovakia, described the gift in a letter he wrote to his wife from prison. While sitting “on a pile of rusty iron” and gazing “into the crown of an enormous tree that stretched, with dignified repose, up and over all the fences,” he said he “felt a sense of reconciliation, indeed of an almost gentle assent to the inevitable course of events as revealed” to him then and “a carefree determination to face what had to be faced.” He claimed to have been “struck by love,” though he did not know precisely for whom or what.

Others describe redemption as being brought into a higher consciousness, and given a glimpse of ultimate existence. We go to church to integrate these glimpses into our lives. But, some gifts are hard to take.

We can be like a childhood doll who is being brought to life, but as the plastic becomes flesh, begins to resist because she fears that losing her hard body means that she is dying.

The truth is that transformation – whether you believe it's about improvement you earn, or redemption you are given – is real work. And, it is best done in community. I will not be surprised if secularists begin to create their own rituals and practices, and look for motivations beyond reason to make sense of their lives.

I suspect it will look a lot like, you know, church.

See you on Sunday!

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames

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