

WHAT ST. FRANCIS-IN-THE-WOOD MEANS TO ME

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It is a privilege to be asked to speak about what St Francis means to me, thank you to the Stewardship Committee.

My talk is a bit different from the wonderful ones given by Ian McBeath and Don Millerd. Unlike Don, my family did not attend worship together, rather for a few years I was “dropped off” as a young, shy, child to our local Anglican parish St. Faith’s in Kerrisdale. I faced the daunting prospect of encountering God as that small child amidst most people I did not know, knowing nothing about the bible, and finally, I just let mom keep sleeping in so I didn’t have to go to that torture anymore. YET, I have to thank my mom for me being here today at St Francis. Not only was the spark of God given to me there, for some strange reason I knew and always fiercely

considered myself Anglican, yet I had attended other different churches for various reasons.

Many years later, living here, I had no doubt that I wanted my eldest son Ryan (who is now 28 and just married to a Christian) baptized – at St. Monica’s. There was that spark again, I was brought back to church and attended St. Monica’s with my two very young sons as a single parent. Although I loved everyone there, at the time I was the last Sunday School teacher and, worse, my sons were the last children left in Sunday school. They needed community.

So with that painful decision I moved the three of us here to St. Francis, eighteen or nineteen years ago. It has turned out to be one of the biggest blessings of my life. In fact, as my house is listed for sale right now, I can imagine if I have to leave everything else behind to start a new life somewhere else, but the only thing I can’t imagine leaving is here, our St. Francis. That does me in.

This church building and the church itself - the people - made a single mom on her own and her young children feel welcome and were supportive. I found myself diving into duties like counting the collection, volunteering at Covenant House and the important Social Concerns Committee. Service to God through the church and all areas of our life is part of being a Christian. I was part of something so special – something bigger than ourselves with others who were on the same path.

While my sons grew and went off to live their own lives, I have come here on my own because you are my family. A chronic pain issue and medications, among other things, have kept me away at times and from participating in many areas of the church, which has been and is very painful for me. I also have not been able to give the financial support that the church needs, sometimes struggling even to eat. Yet! St. Francis is in my Will. Don Millerd, fortunately I already have this one figured out! We owe so much to those who came before as well, who have bequeathed this Holy space for us. Each week parishioners who have died previously are read out, most of whom I knew and loved, and I am so thankful for them.

So the take away word I want to express today is *Gratitude*. There is no where else in the world quite like St. Francis-in-the-Wood.

Gratitude for a Holy home as a rock and a family for a single mom and her young children. For the love of friends as a single woman. To be able to come to worship with fellow Christians, to learn and grow and hopefully give back to friends also on the journey.

I happen to be very un-dogmatic, the kind of church St. Francis is, although of course there are tenants of our faith that act as anchors. The love of Christ, the Spirit, of God, dwells here and each time I come I am renewed. It is a mystery I cannot understand – why did I open this gift and yet so many people in our world, even when you express to them how incredible it is, do not open it. St. Francis is an extraordinary Christian place of worship. We question, our role is to not tell others what they must believe but to facilitate growth into the full person God wants us to be. I so wish it is our church that people know about, not conservative fundamentalist ones, or the ones who insist on rigid doctrines!

Questioning brings me to five of the specific areas, not just the general love, the people, and so many experiences I have treasured most about St. Francis.

For our Wednesday morning group, where we have a short service and then bible study – with these great twists of tangents and doubting questions and laughter and “ah-ha” moments where God breaks in and we have something given to our hearts, and heads. With the deepest Gratitude always.

For our Ministers Angus and Janice – how I have learned and grown from their sermons and their ministries, their caring and their devotion, their beliefs and their doubts. They have given me more than they will ever know. They have made me a better person, well I try. With the deepest Gratitude always.

For our pilgrimage to Assisi to help us learn and understand more about our patron Saint, St. Francis. To be able to walk in his footsteps, try and understand the depth of his devotion, to experience beauty, another culture and great food and wine! - among such beloved friends with such camaraderie - was one of the most incredible experiences of my life. With the deepest Gratitude always.

Fourth is my role carrying the cross and serving when I have been able to be here – assisting in a tiny way the priests readying communion. I have the privilege of sitting right next to Christ's gift of Himself – his Body and Blood. It has given me such a deeper devotion to my faith and to our communion. A Holy Mystery. In these anguished times. There was one week recently when I had seen a retriever puppy at a kill shelter in the US on Facebook – with a scar up his entire face. I was determined to get him no matter what. When I called the shelter – they said he had died of some disease he had caught. I kept my emotions in check that week but was so seriously mad at God and the totality of suffering in the world. That next Sunday I was sitting in my server's chair watching Angus prepare the wine and bread and it hit me – along came communion. I couldn't stop the tears as I realized in a flash of that moment that I will never understand the suffering in the world – but as I looked at that cup of wine I knew I didn't have to. God's Son's blood (whether you believe it is mystically transformed or symbolic makes no difference, to me anyway) told me Jesus is WITH US – and that is how I know that puppy is ok now. That is how I know everything will be ok. That is the HOPE we hold as Christians. With the deepest Gratitude always.

And fifth are the people who are able to give so generously so that I and others may experience God's LOVE here, and take it out into the world in our daily lives. Without coming to St. Francis-in-the-Wood, I realize I start to wither. We are SO blessed. With the deepest Gratitude always.