

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 *Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labour: If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.*

In 2016, I moved to Georgia with three boxes of books, three children carrying backpacks full of what was supposed to be clothing but was actually stuffed animals, and a strange sense of hope for a new beginning. Literally nothing else. After a bitter collapse of our family unit, the children and I had lived for six months in short-term rentals and at the mercy and kindness of family. There was even a camping trip we took to justify living in the car.

The brutal winters of the Midwest were a metaphor for my life. I needed to leave that cruelty. I chose the Southeast Coast because I loved Savannah when I had visited once. However, at first I had a hard time finding housing. I couldn't afford to buy a house big enough for all of us in Savannah. But there was another option--buying a fixer-upper. I got lucky. Within weeks, I found a foreclosure house outside of Hinesville that needed a lot of work--and that's an understatement. And that's how I met Brad Sherman.

Brad came to my house to give me estimates on solar power, and after touring the disaster of my project he said, "Here take this email and message my wife. You will love her. And she will love you."

Now folks, that's not something I normally did. I was not the kind of person to cold call or cold email. I was the kind of person who went months without talking to anyone other than my children, and ordered Amazon groceries for delivery, especially when drowning in grief. But the loneliness was getting to me. So, I emailed Laura Sherman. The very next day she

showed up at my house with Parker's sweet tea and we spent the entire day on the porch laughing and me revealing to this complete stranger all of the dreams I had for my children and my life and this disaster of a house. The Facebook 2016 memory that popped up this past Thursday morning was of my new friend, Laura, inviting me to St Paul's. I declined, because driving from Hinesville to St Paul's every Sunday seemed like too much extra work and gas cost that I really couldn't afford. Spoiler alert, I couldn't afford not to.

Instead, my children and I attended several churches in Hinesville. Nothing stuck. There was no wonder, no reverence, no sense of home. Sometimes, there was a lot of judgment after finding out I was a divorced single mom. The chaos and noise of my children were not welcome in many of them. Going to church became a tedious task. My kids grew resentful and begged to go to the beach instead. Then one Sunday I said to the kids, "Okay we're going to go to church where Carolina goes to church." (Carolina is Laura's granddaughter.) My kids scowled at me with trepidation. But we went.

Strangers though we were, they were welcomed in Sunday school and the Greek dancing lessons afterward. We delighted in the baklava and spanakopita served at the coffee hour. Driving home it didn't feel like any other Sunday. I felt rested. But I figured it was a one-time thing and we'd continue to look closer to home.

The next Sunday Lily, Holly, and Isaac got up at 7:00 a.m., bathed and dressed for church, picked out clothes for me, made me breakfast and begged to go back to St Paul's. They did this every Sunday for the next year, and my worries of gas money and sometimes my exhaustion that tempted me to stay home and sleep were defeated by sheer will and enthusiasm.

They were relentless. Especially for the dance lessons. And Tia's poundcake, to be honest. I was grateful for this gift.

The story doesn't end there though. At our first stint volunteering for the Festival, a volunteer came and got me: Lily and Holly were fists-fight street brawling in the upstairs hallway. I ran to the scene of calamity, the girls swearing at each other, pulling hair, locked in sibling combat. My Isaac threw up on himself as soon as he saw me. I thought for sure that would be the end of our welcome at St. Paul's. Instead, the kindness and understanding of other parents helping me clean them up and calm them down and then messaging me through the evening coaxed me back to the Festival the next day. Or maybe it was the shortage of volunteers?

Every Sunday I had to evaluate my budget. Could I afford to drive that far and back? How were the kids doing emotionally, i.e., would there be a humiliating public meltdown? How could I contribute? But every Sunday that we attended, I came home able to breathe, a feeling of healing. Small acts of kindness, not pity, lifted me up. Our second Christmas in Georgia, I was broke. Between the house repairs and ongoing legal bills related to the divorce, I had nothing left. After church one Sunday, Laura, who by that time was my best friend here in Georgia, led me to the parking lot and filled the backseat of my car with gifts for my kids. She, and the generosity of all who were part of that surprise, saved Christmas for my kids that year.

Father Vasile was especially kind to my son Isaac, teaching him to tie his shoes, and always with an encouraging affection. I watched, too, how everyone treated Father's son, Eugene, with respect. My son, too, lives with the possibility that the medical issues he was born with will complicate his life. Many places we have lived have made clear that difference is

dangerous, and the fear that he will be rejected or even harmed because of that difference lives in my heart most every day. But not here. Not with you all. This is what moved my heart to join this church.

That decision was one I took seriously, as one should. I had been Baptized into the Roman Catholic church. I have a great uncle who was a priest. What would my family say? My heart had been filled of doubt and resentment during the divorce. What had I done to deserve what had happened to my family? Too many times I had dropped to my knees and begged for reprieve from the grief and fear.

I remember a moment that I had experienced a sublime wonder in a church, during the Easter service here at St. Paul's, the choir voices filling the Nave with awe. I felt at peace, finally. This was the moment all doubts drifted away, and I knew I belonged here. My prayers were answered. I was ready to be Chrismated.

When my oldest daughter, Lily, decided to be baptized and join the church too, Gabrielle Franklin (May her Memory be Eternal) eagerly proclaimed that she wanted to be Lily's Godmother. That burst of affection and acceptance did wonders for my girl, who had felt rejected by a lot of situations outside her control. Ms. Franklin scooped her up into faith and this fellowship transformed my daughter in ways I did not expect. Her tantrums and outbursts ceded, she became more focused at home and school.

Those first two years here in Georgia were unimaginably hard. There were two hurricanes. A tree fell on my house. My son spent time in the hospital for respiratory complications. A car accident. I had people reaching out to me that didn't know me and didn't know what I was going through, just to welcome me to the church and make me feel like I belonged.

It is here, too, I found love. Not just because I fell in love with and married Tony (that's a love story for another day). I found family love and friendship from so many of you here. I may not have had money to give at first, but I was never made to feel that my poverty was a burden. I still give what I can in time, in talent, and financially. It is in the fellowship of this community that I have rebuilt my life from ashes and debris. I could not have done this alone.

Let's remember this month of stewardship, that every coin dropped in that basket does good. From the choir, Sunday School, children learning Greek dance, the treats served up at the luncheons, all of it, brings in those in need of a refuge, those in need of a hospital for the soul, for the hurting and grieving. None of us are doing this alone.