



churched

one kid's journey toward God despite a holy mess

matthew paul turner

Praise for
Churched

“*Churched* is funny, poignant, and surprisingly moving. In this deft story of his fundamentalist upbringing, Matthew Paul Turner proclaims the good news: that even church can’t drown out the message of Jesus.”

—SARA MILES, author of *Take This Bread*

“Turner’s *Churched* lives in that elusive space between whimsical memories of an innocent youth and cringe-inducing flashbacks of life growing up in the church. Like a visit with long-lost relatives, *Churched* reintroduced me to characters anyone who grew up in the church will find familiar, and I was surprised to find that I was glad to see them. Sweethearted, funny, and honest, *Churched* had me reminiscing about the little boy searching for God that I once was and gently reminded me I still have some miles to travel.”

—DAN MERCHANT, writer/director of *Lord, Save Us From Your Followers*

“Thanks to *Churched*, Matthew Paul Turner’s vivid and often-hilarious account of his childhood, I realized that not having grown up in evangelical culture is less of a handicap than I previously thought!”

—ANDREW BEAUJON, author of *Body Piercing Saved My Life* and writer for the *Washington Post*

“Turner crafts an amusing field guide to fundamentalism that’s both a gentle lampoon of hypocrisy and misplaced fervor and a model of how to survive being ‘churched’ without cynically rejecting the good with the bad, the Founder with his followers.”

—ANNA BROADWAY, author of *Sexless in the City*

“Matthew Paul Turner’s memoir has the insight of Anne Lamott and the comic honesty of David Sedaris. His stories force us to wonder which of our Christian beliefs and practices come from Scripture and which spring up out of our own preferences and fears.”

—ROB STENNETT, author of *The Almost True Story of Ryan Fisher*

“Finally! A bona fide humorist in the North American church! I might be tempted to say Matthew Paul Turner is Christendom’s answer to David Sedaris, but Matthew stands on his own without the comparison. A memoirist who doesn’t take himself or the world too seriously but still manages to write profoundly and beautifully, Turner gave me a belly laugh on almost every page. If you grew up believing ‘being conformed not to this world’ meant being the weirdest kid on the block, *Churched* will be the funniest book you’ve read in years!”

—LISA SAMSON, award-winning author of *Quaker Summer*, *Embrace Me*, and *Justice in the Burbs*

“With his homespun humor and eye for living detail, Matthew Paul Turner’s *Churched* invites readers to rethink the quirks of Christian culture for the sake of uncovering that which is lastingly good and worth holding dear. Turner’s work is a refreshingly gentle discussion of faith and culture that has the potential to spark meaningful conversations.”

—PETE GALL, author of *My Beautiful Idol*

“If you didn’t think Jesus-loving fundamentalist kids were very funny, Matthew Paul Turner proves you wrong.”

—JASON BOYETT, author of *Pocket Guide to the Bible* and *Pocket Guide to the Apocalypse*

“How can a book be so stinkin’ funny and yet so poignant at the same time? Matthew Paul Turner found his voice! After reading *Churched*, I wanted to hug him and then toss out all of my son’s clip-on ties.”

—JENNIFER SCHUCHMANN, author of *Six Prayers God Always Answers*

“Who knew that a journey through faith and fundamentalism could be so painfully funny? I laughed out loud many a time while reading *Churched*. Matthew Paul Turner manages to channel both boyhood innocence and wry retrospective through this fast-moving account of growing up with Jesus in late twentieth-century America and beyond.”

—MIKE MORRELL, TheOoze.com

“A funny and heartfelt portrayal of one man’s attempt to find true meaning despite his upbringing among fundamentalists who taught him that Azrael—the cat from *The Smurfs*—was an agent of Satan. The true miracle of this book is that its author never manages to lose his faith.”

—ROBERT LANHAM, author of *Sinner’s Guide to the Evangelical Right*

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P R E S S

CHURCHED

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For Elias

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In thoughtful memory of Michael, Craig, and Rich

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The riddles of God are more satisfying
than the solutions of man.

—G. K. CHESTERTON

Prelude

The man's shoulder was inked with a tattoo of Jesus breathing fire out of his mouth, which I concluded to mean one of two things: the man was going to offer me the opportunity to be born again in the hot fumes of a fire-breathing Messiah or he planned to kill me and make it necessary for me to *be* born again.

Like any “good” American, I had already been born again—since childhood I'd pretty much been on shuffle and repeat—but I still feared either scenario. I couldn't stop looking at the man's shoulder. His Jesus was green and faded, and because of a small mole, it appeared as though my Lord and Savior had a foreign object dangling from one nostril. Then the man looked at me from the opposite end of the sauna, tightened the towel around his waist, and said, “How are you, man? My name is Jim.”

I didn't say anything at first. His question sort of paralyzed me. Would he pull a small Gideons Bible from somewhere

underneath that towel, look up a bunch of frightful verses in Romans, and then ask me to get down on my hands and knees and repeat after him? I wouldn't do it. Not in a sauna. Not just wearing a towel. Besides, I had sworn off being born again *again* in this decade.

"Hello." I spoke carefully, still not ready to trust a person who had a flaming-tongue Messiah on an appendage. "My name is Matthew."

"Good to meet you, Matthew. Man, I don't know about you, but I have had the craziest day." Jim stared at me as he talked. I think he was making sure I paid attention. "I didn't even work out today. I just came right to the sauna." He stretched his arms and then massaged his left shoulder, pinching Jesus's face with his fingers.

I live in Nashville. The stereotypes about this town are true. Everyone is or has been a musician at some point in their life. Most of us who live here will carry on long conversations with people we don't know. When it rains here, the majority of us forget how to drive and become fully capable of killing ourselves. And everyone here has asked Jesus into their hearts at least once, if only to fulfill the requirements for getting a Tennessee driver's license.

But if I was going to stay true to the Nashville way, I would have to ask Jim to explain his "crazy day." That's not considered nosey in this town. He fully expected me to ask.

"What's been so crazy about your day?"

"Oh, just work, man. One of those days when you wonder whether or not you should have gotten out of bed."

“What kind of work do you do?”

“I’m an associate pastor at the Pentecostal church just up the road.”

“The apostolic one?”

“Oh, you know it?”

“It’s sort of difficult to miss.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. And it’s about to get bigger. The deacon board just approved a ten-million-dollar expansion. Some of the members think we need a new *connection center*. I think it’s a waste of money, but what are you going to do? So Matthew, are you a Christian?”

“I love *Jesus*. Does that count?”

Jim laughed as though he understood what I meant.

At the time, I was going through a period when I didn’t like telling people I was a Christian. I didn’t want them to be scared of me, fearing that I would invite them to church or a “rock concert” starring Kutless. And I didn’t want them blaming me for the war in Iraq. Simply telling people I loved Jesus seemed like a cop-out to some of my friends, but often it kept me from having to own the sins of evangelicals in places like Kansas or South Carolina or two miles up the road at Jim’s Pentecostal church.

“You know, man,” said Jim, “I moved here a couple of years ago from Connecticut, where it’s—*in my opinion*—spiritually dry. I thought moving here would make being a Christian a whole lot easier.”

“Easier? Why did you think that?”

“Because Nashville is the Christian Mecca.” Jim made air

quotes with his fingers when he said, “Christian Mecca.” I’m sure he did it so I wouldn’t assume he believed Nashville was Mecca or that Mecca was Christian.

Among Christians, air quotes are a form of contextualization. I’m partial to using them myself, mostly because they prevent somebody from taking a potentially rash or exaggerated statement and using it against me. “Wait just a minute,” I can say to my antagonist. “I totally threw air quotes around the words *big fat loser* when describing the pastor. That clears me, man. I’m clean.”

While they’re not biblical, air quotes seem to sanctify insults and debatable theology like baptismal water sanctifies a baby’s forehead.

But I understood Jim’s point. While I’m quite sure religious people in places like Chicago and Detroit don’t kneel southward when they say prayers to Jesus, I have met a good number of vacationers who come to Nashville because this city is a big ol’ John Deere buckle in the Bible Belt.

“Seriously, think about it, Matthew. Do you know of any other city in America better known for its fear of God?” Jim wiped sweat off his brow. “I don’t think I do.”

I thought for a second. “I hear Colorado Springs is rather fearful.”

“I’m sure that’s true. But I doubt it’s Nashville. I’ve been told this town has more churches per capita than any other city in America.” Jim nodded. “Honest-to-God truth, Matthew, that’s what I’ve been told by a number of people, and I can believe it.”

I believed it too. No doubt we have a lot of churches in this town. But since I've heard the same statistic used in reference to Dallas, Birmingham, and Orlando, I'm not sure it's scientific. But scientific matters don't hold much weight in Christian cultural claims, so it probably wouldn't count even if proven.

Even if Nashville doesn't lead with the *most* churches, I've always said that one of this city's chief exports is Jesus. God's only Son gets shipped, bused, couriered, radioed, televised, faxed, e-mailed, and, if need be, dropped like a bomb from twenty thousand feet in places all over the world because of what happens here in Nashville. In many ways, we are God's command center. His Pentagon. His newer Jerusalem.

With a push of a button, we can have a million Bibles dropped in a remote location in China. With a phone call or two, we can get a person carrying some very good news to show up on your doorstep, like Publishers Clearing House. The only catch is, you have to die before you're able to afford that mansion you've always dreamed of.

Jim and I walked out of the sauna to cool off. He sat on one of the benches, and I went over to the water fountain.

"So tell me why you thought moving to Nashville would make it easier to be a Christian," I said.

He laughed. "Because Christians are everywhere. I thought it would be amazing to be in a city where Jesus is as much a part of the culture as Dolly and Cracker Barrel."

I laughed. "Okay, I get that. I've probably been there at some point in my life."

"I also thought it would make being a pastor a lot easier.

I mean, back home I would never have had this kind of conversation with somebody at the gym. Here, it happens every time I work out. It's almost annoying. Sometimes it feels like we're playing church. It's difficult to explain."

"But I understand what you're saying."

I'd been looking for a way to ask about the tattoo, but with no open window, I just blurted, "Jim, you have to tell me the deal with the tattoo."

"You mean you don't like it?" He laughed. "Man, I was young. I guess it was my way of sharing the truth about Jesus without having to say anything."

"And that truth would be what? That Jesus is a flame-thrower? Puff, the Magic Dragon?"

"Dude, I was an idiot back then. Now, I'm embarrassed to go to a public pool where people who don't know me can see me without a shirt. I'm scared to death somebody will take it seriously."

"I kind of did. It's one of the most awful tattoos I've ever seen. I'd call that 'doctor'—you know, the one who advertises on 107.5—and have that thing removed."

I headed back to the sauna for another round. For a few minutes, I sat there alone, thinking about my conversation with Jim.

I wasn't a pastor, but I had been to church more times than I could count, and I had lived in Nashville for a while, so I knew something about what he felt. At first, this town feels like a shot of faith in the arm.

When I first moved here, I thought it was energizing to be a part of a community where you were odd if you didn't believe in Jesus. I felt at home. Even alive at times. But I started thinking about it too much, which led me to wonder if I was just filling a role in a *Stepford*-type reality.

Jim opened the sauna door, stepped inside, and sat down. He didn't say anything, so I didn't either.

My mind wandered back to a service I attended at one of Nashville's largest churches a year or so after moving here. I hadn't really wanted to go, but a friend begged me. "It's our annual Harvest Festival on Sunday," he told me. "You'll love it. Please come. God always shows up on Harvest Sunday."

Against my better judgment, I agreed to go with him. I didn't want to miss an event that God had in his Day-Timer. Taking our seats in the balcony, my friend said, "They're expecting something like fifteen thousand people. An extra service had to be added. Just think about how many people will be saved today." He shook his head like people do at the circus while watching the trapeze act or when Spider-Man shows up to save the day. My friend was anticipating acrobats and special effects.

By the time the choir filled the loft, the room was packed, and the orchestra began playing an old hymn. I knew the song from the first notes.

"Bringing in the Sheaves." I used to sing it when I was a kid. Back then, I knew every word, but I didn't understand what they meant until much later.

The choir began singing the first verse.

Sowing in the morning,
Sowing seeds of kindness...

Hearing that old song reminded me of the time my father and I went to a neighbor's farm and picked a bushel of sweet corn right off the stalks. The farmer had a lengthy driveway. As we drove over the bumpy gravel, Dad pointed out a golden wheat field.

"That wheat is ready to harvest, Buck." My father's eyes brightened any time he saw a ripened field of wheat, corn, or anything edible. "You know, when I was a kid, harvest was one of my favorite times of the year. Workers came from all over the county and helped us bundle up the wheat into sheaves. It was such an important day for us, sort of our payday. I remember Daddy being so particular about his crop, making sure those workers got every piece of wheat in that field. He'd get so mad when somebody wasn't doing a good job; he'd go behind the workers and pick up whatever they left."

My friend's pastor only mentioned the word *harvest* once during his sermon. He didn't talk about wheat fields and never mentioned a sheave. He asked, "Have you given any thought to what will happen on Judgment Day?"

Then he directed the sermon toward the members of his church. "Church, souls are being lost every single day. *Why?* Because we aren't doing our job. We aren't out harvesting

God's crop. People are going to get left behind because of you and me."

I sank back into my pew, my heart feeling anxious. I'd heard that same message a million times, it seemed, but rather than making me feel hopeful, on that day the Good News scared me. I thought about my grandfather. Even he didn't want to leave any wheat in the field.

I could only imagine God feeling the same way.

Jim jarred me out of my thoughts. "You think this is what hell feels like?"

"You talking about the sauna or living in Nashville?"

He smiled. "The sauna."

"Then I doubt it. I like this too much."

"Well, I guess I'd better get going. I have a meeting with my pastor tonight. He's convinced that I don't speak in tongues."

"And that's a problem?"

"Of course—we're Pentecostals. It's what we do."

"Sounds like your church might have a little baggage." My grin faded. "But who am I to judge? I'm still unpacking my own."

God's New Digs

It happened when I was almost five. I got yanked out of my life as an ordinary kid and plopped into a small fundamentalist church. The experience was kind of like being kidnapped by Puritans, except without a witch trial and a dunking booth. An easygoing kid with undiagnosed ADHD, I was bright-eyed, charismatic, and inquisitive. Looking back, I'm inclined to think I would have made a really good beagle.

On my first Sunday morning as an independent fundamental Baptist, my mother walked into my bedroom and scoured my closet in hopes of finding me something uncomfortable to wear.

"You're dressing up for church this morning, Matthew." Mom pulled out a pair of pants and some black socks and then looked at me like she was thoughtfully considering eating me for breakfast. "Which *means* you're wearing a tie."

She tossed my navy blue clip-on across my lap.

“Please don’t argue with me this morning. If you do, I’m getting your father involved and letting him deal with it.”

Mom turned her back toward me and rummaged through my closet for my black belt.

“I really mean it, Matthew. I don’t feel like arguing with you this morning. I have a lot on my mind.”

Thinking too much made my mother’s complexion pasty, like somebody with the stomach flu or a sun allergy. Whenever Mom looked pale, she was usually preoccupied with something. And on that morning her face looked as white as a bowl full of Cream of Wheat.

I had the same problem but without the telltale pallor. Sometimes my four-year-old brain felt as overworked as a somersaulting circus dog.

That Sunday, the new church weighed on Mom’s mind. She and Dad had come to the conclusion that God wasn’t attending our old church and it didn’t make sense to go to a place even God didn’t want to go to.

One afternoon a young pastor named Dave Nolan knocked on our door. He talked to my parents for more than an hour. I only heard bits and pieces of the story, but the gist of their conversation was about a brand-new church he was starting. Mom and Dad seemed to think Pastor Nolan’s visit was a message from God.

I’ve learned over the years that getting messages from God is a lot like getting a brand-new package of Silly Putty. On that first day it seems like the greatest gift in the world. It’s all

you can think about. You play with it nonstop. But the more you squash it around in your hands, press it up against stuff to see if it sticks, and allow other people to put their mucky hands all over it, the dirtier and less impressive it becomes. Within three days, you're bored with it, the protective shell it came in is cracked, and you think it might be growing some hair. I was pretty certain Mom had thought and rethought our church move into a nasty little blob of dirt-and-fuzz-covered putty hiding underneath the couch.

"Do you want to wear your white dress shirt or your blue dress shirt?" Mom held both selections so I could see them. I pointed to the white one. "Okay, now for shoes."

As my mother hunted down my black church shoes, I sat on the edge of my bed and bounced like the fiberglass Scooby-Doo ride at the A&P. Mom searched but kept an eye on me. I think she was waiting for me to complain about the tie. Not that day. I was far too excited about the new church to complain.

Under ordinary circumstances, the mere thought of wearing a necktie caused me to fall onto the floor in hysterics. I'd wail like a siren, beat my hands against the carpet, and kick my feet against anything they could reach. To this day, I believe I had an excellent reason for having a seizure whenever the idea of wearing a clip-on necktie was posed, but my mother thought I was being ridiculous. She found it difficult to believe that every one of my clip-on ties licked my neck when she wasn't looking.

“It *really* happens, Mom,” I explained to her once.

“Then why haven’t I seen it happen?”

“I guess you aren’t looking at the right times.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. As soon as you turn your head, the tie sticks its tongue out at you and then starts licking me.”

“Oh, so the tie does that? That’s impossible, Matthew.”

Sometimes talking to my mother felt like explaining Jesus to my Uncle Ramil, who was from Uzbekistan. She would look at me with her eyebrows raised and patronizingly nod her head as if she completely understood everything I was talking about, when, in truth, she didn’t even speak my language.

“What’s wrong with Matthew, hon?” My father’s question gave me hope.

“Oh, he says his clip-on tie is, and I quote, *licking* his neck.’”

My father laughed. “You think he’s imagining it?”

“I bought them at Sears, Virgil. You’d think it would be on the news or something if Sears was selling perverted neckties. Am I right?”

I should have known my father would take my mother’s side. He wore the kind of neckties that wrapped around your neck and choked you from the front, not the kind with tongues that hung on to your shirt for dear life.

“You are going to look so handsome this morning, young man.” My mother helped me shove my head through my T-shirt and then helped me put on my dress shirt.

“Mom.” I watched her fingers start at the bottom of my shirt and button their way to the top. “Do you really think God will be at our new church?”

“I think God is always with us.”

“You do?”

Mom nodded her head.

“Do you think I’ll see him this morning?”

“I guess we’ll have to wait and see, now, won’t we?” Mom tucked my shirt in with one hand and held on to my pants with the other so they wouldn’t fall down. “What I do know is—you might not like wearing it, but this tie is going to perfectly match these new plaid pants I bought you.”

Mom snapped the front button of my pants, smoothed out the wrinkles on my shirt with her hands, and then picked up my navy blue necktie and clipped it to the top button of my shirt.

As soon as she buttoned down my collar, the clip got fresh with my clavicle.

“There, that’s perfect.” Mom patted my shoulder and gave me a peck on the cheek. “Now, that’s not so bad, is it?”

It wasn’t bad at all. In fact, I was starting to enjoy getting kissed by polyester.

“Look at you.” The color in Mom’s face seemed to be coming back. “I think you look like the perfect little Baptist, if I say so myself.”

Mom walked out of my bedroom and left me standing in front of my mirror. *A perfect little Baptist?* I thought. I didn’t

see that. As far as I was concerned, I looked exactly the same as I had the Sunday before, except I was wearing a pair of pants that matched the dining-room tablecloth.

I felt uncool, but definitely not Baptist.

Going to church was not a new thing for me. Mom and Dad rolled me into my first church service and parked my stroller next to their pew when I was eight weeks old. I've been told that all the important people at my church walked up to me that day and put their faces in my stroller, spoke to me in strange tongues, and poked my belly. I didn't get much out of that first worship service. All I did was sleep, pass gas, and wet my diaper. But a large portion of that congregation was older than the cotton gin, so I wasn't much of a novelty.

Before we switched churches, my mother and father weren't Christians. They were Methodists. That's what they wrote down when the last census had come around. I suppose, to my parents, merely jotting down "Christian" only differentiated them from Jews, Muslims, or Buddhists, which wasn't good enough.

"Who in the world is going to think we're Buddhists?" My father had a very practical, albeit *frank*, way of looking at things. "We're white people from Maryland. We hunt things. I bet there's not one Buddhist within fifty miles of here. I'd be much more concerned about someone thinking we're Catholic."

I grew up in Kent County, Maryland, where most people who were Methodists had been born that way. That was true for my mother. Her religion was hereditary. Mom inherited her *Methodistness* from her mother's side of the family, but my father hadn't been born with any identifiable religious gene. His faith was sort of bestowed upon him at the age of nine when his mother started feeling guilty about her family not being religious.

My grandmother set out to change that by making an appointment with the local minister of the Methodist church. Sitting in his office, she told the preacher all about the predicament she was in. He thought he might be able to help. A few days later, she invited the minister over for dinner. After he finished his meal, the minister pushed away from the table and began putting on a water-resistant poncho.

"I wear this so I don't get my suit splashed. You'd be surprised how wet one can get while baptizing."

He then told my grandmother to arrange her six children—two boys and four girls—in a line from oldest to youngest. The minister stood in the kitchen and, after he recited the Lord's Prayer, splashed each kid's face with tap water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

"Well, Ruth, it's official. Your kids are now full-fledged Methodists." The preacher grinned at the children as if he'd just finished giving each of them a shot in the backside, which my father seems to think was appropriate. He says his mother wasn't so much trying to introduce her children to Jesus as she

was sort of vaccinating them in the hope they wouldn't become cult members, alcoholics, or—*God forbid*—Episcopalians. “If you need anything at all, Ruth, you know where to find me.”

At the time, my family belonged to St. James United Methodist Church, just two miles from our home. The congregation met in an old building built in the early nineteenth hundreds. In its heyday, St. James boasted a large attendance, but those days were long gone. Though the church had 350 members on record, many were people who had either moved or were buried in the church's backyard. By the time I was old enough to remember St. James, there were about 60 of us attending on Sunday mornings. My parents were active members. In addition to being on the church's board of directors, my father also taught a boys' Sunday school class. My mother led the children's choir and coached the girls' youth-group basketball squad. It was ministry at its finest.

Our church was located in close proximity to the Chesapeake Bay, which was a big deal. During the summer months, when the boaters were in town for their weekends of fishing, crabbing, and debauchery, our church became a tourist attraction. The sinners didn't join us for Sunday service; they just drove by our church to gawk at our rather impressive steeple. For quite some time, St. James had been known for having one of the biggest steeples in the district. On Sundays after church, we'd usually see seven or eight cars with fancy hood ornaments drive by to marvel at our holy monstrosity.

“Gosh, rich people are so strange. Look at them stretching their heads out of their cars. They look like turkeys.” Miss Edith was the oldest woman in our church. Each Sunday during the summer, she and a friend sat out on the church’s front steps and watched tourists drive by. “Good Lord, Joyce, that car came all the way from New Jersey.” She squinted her eyes as she looked. “I don’t think you could pay me to live in New Jersey. All that smog. I don’t know how people up there do it.”

I watched her take a deep breath, pull out her driving glasses, and then light a cigarette. As she took her first drag, the expression on her face was glorious, as though she was slowly inhaling the Holy Spirit. “They act like they’ve never seen a church before. That’s because they’re from New Jersey.”

“You should have been here last Sunday, Edith.” Miss Joyce waved her hand in front of her face to chase away the cigarette smoke. “I bet you ten cars went by. George and I sat here for almost thirty minutes and watched car after car roll down its windows and gaze up at our steeple. One of the women even took a picture.”

Miss Edith’s mouth dropped open, and her eyes widened, making her look like a slot machine.

“They took a picture? Lord knows, if people are going to take photographs of our steeple, then somebody should get up there and paint the darn thing. If you ask me, it’s starting to get a little crusty.” Miss Edith looked both ways like she was getting ready to slide off the steps and across a street. “Like the preaching has been lately.”

Miss Edith took a second look around and then nodded her head. “I mean, seriously, Joyce. *Yertle the Turtle*? What kind of preacher uses a Dr. Seuss book as the basis for his sermon?”

“You don’t have to say another word, Edith. I know exactly what you mean. I told my George, ‘How in the world is someone supposed to find God in a fairy tale about an amphibian?’”

“What’d he say?”

“He thought it was ridiculous. And, as you know, my George studied biology.”

Pastor Dean Woody liked to believe one could find God in a variety of things. Unfortunately for him, a number of St. James’s oldest members thought his theory was a bunch of hogwash. A couple of the parishioners even suggested that they didn’t believe God would be found dead in some of the junk Pastor Woody mentioned during his sermons.

The Dr. Seuss fiasco resulted in my parents’ wondering whether or not God was showing up for services at St. James.

On one Sunday morning, my father and I arrived at church early. While Dad set up his Sunday school classroom, I decided to see if I could find God. I had heard Pastor Woody say on a couple of occasions that if two were gathered together, God was there. Since Dad and I made two, I thought my chances of finding God were pretty good.

The first place I searched was the church sanctuary. I thought God might prefer being around crosses, the altar, and the walnut floors. But when I searched under the pews, inside

the pulpit, around the choir loft, underneath the piano, and in the storage closet, I didn't see God. After that, I looked inside each of the Sunday school classrooms. Then I opened and closed all of the cupboards and drawers in the kitchen. I even checked the men's room. God seemed to be missing.

"Why can't I find God?" I asked my Sunday school teacher, Miss Thelma, who was, in my opinion, the manliest woman I had ever seen. On top of that, Miss Thelma lived on a dairy farm, so she came to Sunday school smelling like she had rolled around on the ground with the cows. But I loved Miss Thelma. In fact, if I held my nose, I was able to believe she knew more about God than anyone else in the world.

"I tried looking for God this morning," I said to her, "and I couldn't find him anywhere."

Miss Thelma smiled big, stood up from the table, and walked toward me.

Since she was looking right at me, it would have been impolite for me to hold my nose. I took a deep breath and held it, and I tried really hard to pretend I wasn't holding my breath.

"Matthew, here's the thing." Miss Thelma kneeled next to my chair and tapped her hand against my arm.

"Seeing God takes more than simply looking for him with your eyes or listening for him with your ears. It takes faith, Matthew. And faith isn't something we often experience with our five senses."

Unlike cow manure, I thought, letting the air slowly seep out of my lungs.

“Have you seen God?” I asked, then took another breath and held it.

“Yes, I think so, Matthew. I think I see him every Sunday in the faces and grins of you kids.” She looked around the room. Miss Thelma put her arm around me and gave me a sideways hug. She stood up, and as she walked away, I exhaled.

After catching my breath, I looked around the room at all the other kids and tried to find God in the faces of my classmates. But since they were eating animal crackers and drinking fruit punch, all I saw were crumb-covered mouths and lips that had been artificially turned red by Hawaiian fruit punch. My mother was convinced that anything containing artificial food coloring was godless. She wasn't a fan of crumbs either, so if God was there, he was up to no good.

Sunday mornings, I knew when it was time to leave for church. Whenever the house was overtaken by the scent of my father's cologne, I had better find my Bible and be prepared to walk out the back door. Dad wasn't a sophisticated man when it came to his personal scent. The musky sweet aroma he wore on Sunday mornings cost him nine dollars at Drug Fair and made him smell like he'd been stir-fried in a wok. But it served a purpose. Every member of the family knew it was time to leave for church as soon as the house started smelling like Kung Pao chicken.

That was a sure sign that within a couple of minutes Dad

would make his Sunday morning pilgrimage from the bedroom to the garage. We'd hear him walk down the hallway, shutting off lights, closing bedroom doors, and complaining under his breath about the price of electricity.

My father's easy stride never broke rhythm during the week, a walk reminiscent of a farmer trekking across a cornfield. That was how he walked on Mondays at work or on Friday afternoons hunting hedgerows for rabbits.

But on Sunday mornings he walked differently. Less casual. He leaned his body forward a little more and looked up and around a lot less. Sometimes, usually when it was very humid outside, he favored his right leg. His was an intentional swagger, the kind that told me he believed in where he was going and I should too.

"Carole," my father yelled from the kitchen. "Let's go, hon! It's almost 8:35. I don't want to be late on our first Sunday."

By the time my mother was ready to walk out the door, the rest of us had crammed into our blue Chevy Caprice, and Melanie and Kelley were begging my father to not honk the horn for Mom. As she stepped into the car, Dad's eyes looked like eightballs.

"I don't want to hear one word out of you, Virgil." My mother was pale again, and she fanned herself with both hands. "You *had to have pancakes*. And *scrapple*. All of that takes time. It's not my fault if we're late."

Mom turned the passenger vent toward her face. "Is it hot in here? I'm burning up."

“I’m not hot,” Dad said. My sisters shook their heads.

“You’re really not hot?” Mom leaned back against the seat and stared out the window. “Virgil, we’re sure about this, right? You know, about switching churches and all?”

My father laughed. “This started out as your idea.”

“I know. But we’re sure it’s a good one, right?”

“I’ve got no qualms about it, hon.” Dad smiled and gently squeezed my mother’s thigh.

That was all my mother needed—to know that Dad was sure.

As I got older, I learned that Dad’s certainty in a decision simply meant that what he had decided was inevitable—like taxes or death or a moral lesson at the end of *Little House on the Prairie*. Being sure didn’t always mean it was a good decision. It just meant that, whether he liked it or not, he would have to learn to live with it. And the rest of us would too.

A few minutes later, Dad turned into a parking lot.

“Is this where God moved?” I pressed one side of my face up against the car’s back window.

“Isn’t this the Board of Education building?” asked Kelley. “I think I’ve been here before.”

“Probably where you took summer school last year,” said Melanie.

“Shut up. This wasn’t where I took summer school.”

“Where’s the steeple, Dad?” I asked. “There’s no steeple. How can we have church without a steeple?”

“Mom,” said Melanie, “isn’t this where your friend Pearl works?”

Mom nodded.

“Dad.” I pulled at the hem of my father’s suit jacket. “How is God going to know where to show up without a steeple?”

“God will find us, Buck. Trust me, he’ll find us.”

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