

My companion at table

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I try to keep worship to an hour, even on communion Sundays. I keep a side-eye on the clock and move certain things along, because I want to take plenty of time when the congregation comes forward. I look each person in the eye as I give the bread.

But that morning they seemed to barrel toward me two by two. I barely had a chance to tear the bread, much less connect. A few weeks later I would leave, and we would have a liturgy of farewell—offering each other release, and forgiveness where needed. We would not break the bread together again. It all went by so fast.

It's the same with mothering. I've packed three children off to college, and in each freshman dorm room, before the farewells, I've made the bed. I made my daughter's this August, more colorfully arrayed than her older brothers'. It seemed like one thing I could control. I made the bed, just as we set the table for the holy meal. The deacons in my last church had a photograph of the communion table, to be sure of arranging things right. No one could remember who took the picture, or when. But it provided a reassuring sense of order.

I parted with my daughter not long after my departure from that church, a community where people embraced her and loved to hear her sing. As the congregation came up the aisle, so quickly, I told myself I could not think about how it was the last time. Amid the choir members came my daughter, her long hair shining in the sun pouring through the sanctuary windows. I flashed back a decade to a shy seven-year-old, the first to come forward for communion at my ordination.

The last days of childhood tumbled toward us like the hurrying communicants, the weeks before she would leave parting like a wave racing to break on the shore. We got the children all gathered around the dining room table one last time before the multiple transitions that left us wondering when it will happen next. The vagaries of train timetables and late flights and happy additions to the guest list meant we ate only one meal with everyone present: breakfast. The next oldest, bound for graduate school out west, scrambled 17 eggs, while my spouse made pancakes for three

generations of our blended family.

The youngest brother set the big table, fascinated by the ritual. He is eight and counts up the family over and over again, forgetting a brother in his hurry to remember the other brother's new girlfriend. The table came from my mother, treasured because with its four leaves it holds so many people. When she died, I found a hand-written catalog of the right tablecloths to use with one leaf, or two, or three. One banquet-sized cloth fit the full table.

On that pancake morning, we added no leaves. We liked squeezing close together, arms brushing shoulders. We calculated the next opportunity to get everyone together. Christmas? They would scatter far from this table. Time growing short, we split the last pancake, all too full for one more but no one willing to leave anything behind.

Amid all this bustle my daughter sat quietly. Now we talk and Skype and text. We know when we will see each other next. We will shop and go out to eat and analyze her friends and mine.

But there's something I'm unlikely to recapture: I miss her most on Sundays. We've been making the journey to church together just about every week of her life. I grieve for the regular intimacy of shared congregational life.

When I became a pastor, she appointed herself a part of the ministry team, the Sunday School Spy. On Sundays we would hurry out the door, searching for a last-minute barrette. When she reached the front of the line for Communion, she would smile at me. Then, on the ride home, she'd deliver frank critiques of my sermons and offer astute observations of the church and its members. I remember Sunday afternoons in the years it was just the two of us, eating carry-out sandwiches on the couch. I miss her company, the times she accompanied me, the ways we companioned each other.

"Companion" literally means "with bread." On that morning when everyone else seemed to rush through the communion line, my daughter took her time. My dear companion paused to let me show Christ's love, and mine, with bread.

I still look for my daughter in the congregation, though I know better. I encourage her to find the companions she will need in her new world. I will do the same. But I never expected my empty nest to be the communion table.