

The formation of a domestic goddess

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May 13, 2013

The women's guild asked Susan to set the table for the luncheon. Susan placed the Tupperware containers directly on the table. Gasps of horror reverberated around the room and the glares injected Susan with a massive dose of domestic shaming. One of the luncheon organizers made a joke and laughed too loudly, while quickly placing the food into glassware. She saved the luncheon from Susan's plastic faux pas.

Susan didn't make a big deal about it. She made up some excuse to leave the luncheon before dessert. She imagined putting up some sort of Yelp review, detailing the situation in order to let people know what kind of church it was. But she knew she would simply disappear from the congregation.

It was a small thing. And Susan knew it. But church was already hard for Susan to get to and thousand reasons kept her from getting there on Sunday morning, so she began to cave to the soccer games, grocery shopping, and *New York Times*. She didn't go to the pastor, with details on how much money her family contributed over the years. She didn't threaten her membership standing, holding the church hostage unless she got her way. She didn't write any letters to the governing body announcing her departure and reciting the reasons. She just dropped out.

It was a tiny control issue that happened in one corner of a fellowship hall. But now, in your mind, multiply this minor discomfort by a thousand. Imagine the drama spreading across the country. Susan will never be back to church, and neither will the thousand other Susans. And another little thing will happen the next week, except it will be with Jackie. And there will be a mishap with plastic forks instead of silver, or with paper plates instead of china. Then the next week Grace won't put the doily down on the platter before the cookies. And the gasps and the shaming will continue and they will reverberate across the country.

Until an entire generation of people stops going to church.

It seems like, in the past, the church (and particularly the women's guilds and circles) may have been an important step in helping a woman become that domestic goddess. They were taught how to serve large groups, with sparkling presentation.

However, in a new generation, with two people working 80 hours to keep a household running, domestic duties look a bit different than they used to. Sometimes that plastic goes right on the table. We consider it a victory when the meal includes something green and has nothing to do with a clown in a yellow jumper. It is necessary for someone to get food to our family. Sometimes it's a woman in the house, sometimes it's a man. The niceties surrounding the meal are not as important. So well-meaning people hovering over the place settings, re-doing all of Susan's work are killing our congregations.

It's a small thing, I know. But as I travel across the country, I've heard the story countless times. Which makes me think that the church might need to give up the job of teaching people how to set the table.