

Shortly after the complete lockdown I found myself back in the office finishing up the work day on my one assigned "office day". The plan was to head to all souls day mass at the basilica on the parkway. I liked to go because it was the day that my grandmother died, the grandmother that raised me, and conveyed unto me every ounce of catholic guilt onto my conscience. Now, for years, as a gay man – I did not take communion. I walked up during the service for a blessing, with my arms crossed. A public signal that I was not living a life that afforded me the privilege of sharing in communion. About mid way through the service, I do not know what came over me but I got up and walked out. I had made the decision that I did not want to belong to a church that thought they could dictate who could participate and who couldn't. What provoked it at that exact minute – I could never explain to you. Now some people have said why didn't I just go up and take communion, that no one was going to say anything, this was never an option for me. It was about principle.

I was living just a few blocks from here at the time and part of my pandemic ritual was to walk at lunch every day on my loop that took me down 2nd street past Christ Church. On a particularly lovely fall day I sat on one of the benches just across church street and decided that I wanted to go the following Sunday. So, the following Sunday – I got up, got dressed and walked the few blocks to the church stood at the gate, and turned around and went home. See With half of my family still living in Northern Ireland as Catholics, It had been drilled into me that being Catholic was more than a religion – it was our history. I felt like I was committing the greatest betrayal. It took a few days of soul searching and compartmentalizing but the following Sunday I got up, got dressed, walked the few blocks, came stayed and have been here since.

Now everyone has a different view on signs, signals, or meanings we can derive out of things that happen, things that seem to point us in a direction or to a decision. I believe that we just need to be in a place in our lives to hear them and understand the meaning or message they have for us.

I have always had an interest in my family genealogy. My father's family of course were Irish, but my mother's family have been in Philadelphia for a long time. During the height of covid my aunt who shares a similar interest in the family history and I both took a DNA test. We have never made much progress with this side of our family tree – which prompted the DNA test. Sometime before the end of that first year I started attending Christ Church my aunt sent me an email with a marriage record. It was a marriage record from Christ Church. I opened it and there it was. On October 10th 1823 my 5th great grandparents – Elizabeth Steel and Godfrey Myers were married on this alter by assistant rector James Abercrombie. This was exactly 200 years ago – just a few weeks back.

I had to know more, so I started my search. I find a pew register from a few years before their marriage took place, I see them sitting just up in the gallery adjacent to the organ, in separate pews but right next to each other. I keep digging through trees shared with DNA matches – I find them living just where the custom house sits today. The following Sunday I left a little earlier from home before service and walked down third street to walnut and looped around and walked up 2nd street – coming into full view of the church, the same route that they would have walked to come to this church 200 years ago.

I wanted to find out everything I could about Elizabeth because it was her family in fact that had been in Philadelphia since the 1600's. I kept digging through my DNA matches with other people who I am related to through her and I stumbled upon another family tree with her parents, and some more records. I start clicking and I suddenly find myself on a catholic register belonging to St Mary's Church. It took a few minutes for my brain to catch up with what I was looking at, but there it was. Elizabeth was born and baptized catholic. The immediate question in my head was, how did she end up here?

Over the next several months I continued my search finally finding more records about her time at Christ Church. My final find was a record of Elizabeth being received into Christ Church on April 13th 1811 – as an adult.

I can make a lot of assumptions about why she ended up here, but I try not to. Her entire family is buried in a vault in St Mary's church yard, but she is not there. I like to think she ended up here for the same reasons I did – but I will never know. All I do know is if she didn't make the same decision 200 years ago that I had to make a few years ago I wouldn't be standing before you today.

While writing this message to give to you today I thought of the Christ Church that my 5th great grandparents were parishioners in. Women were not allowed to be on the Vestry or to serve in the clergy. Being gay, was as you can expect – not accepted and was a punishable crime. And Many members of the congregation actively participated in the enslavement of other people. Today, we are members of the same church, that has a female rector, and the vestry is a pool of diverse people of all back grounds. We also as a church, have done a lot to acknowledge our history and it's ties to slavery through things like the Weeping Time ceremony we hold in the garden.

I see us as stewards, temporary guardians for this wonderful and sacred place. I not only give to Christ Church for my personal connection to this historic place, but also for accepting me fully, for who I am and making me feel welcome every single Sunday I walk through those doors. For allowing me to participate fully in all the traditions. For reminding me that I belong to a wonderful community of people who love this place just as much as I do. Thank you.