

This Home Is Embedded in Me
Youth Sunday, May 30, 2021, 11:15 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
Eva Hooten

Hi Everyone. My name is Eva Hooten, my parents are Tim and Katie Hooten. They started coming to All Saints before I was born, volunteering with CYF and my dad served on the Vestry. My sister, Josie, and I were baptised here. The songs and communion were my favorite parts of the service. You could say communion helped refine my sophisticated pallet. When I was 4, I was removed too quickly from the altar and only got a wafer, so I yelled loud enough for that classic church echo, "I want my wine!"

I participated in choir from the time I was 5 years old and went on the Seattle choir tour. I made a lot of friends here, and then, when I was 10, my family moved to the faraway land of Culver City and we paused our All Saints experience until I rejoined choir in 8th grade and started coming to youth group. That pretty much sums up my backstory. All Saints has been a critical community for my identity formation. It's a second home and basically like the physical representation of my childhood.

When my Dad and I were both diagnosed with Leukemia in 2007, many All Saints families brought us meals and Wilma Jacobson (my godmother) brought communion to the hospital. When I see the kneeling bench, I fondly remember my family gathering in that place for healing prayers. Everytime I walk into the sanctuary, it's like nothing's changed from those early days and I feel the same comfort I had as a child, in the shiny uneven stones that pave the floor, the dim chandlers, the angled backs of the pews, and the unique resonance that voices and sounds take on inside. All Saints has always been a place of comfort, even through pain, even through drama.

Apparently, teenagers have this bad reputation for bringing drama. I'm not naming any names (you know who you are) but some of us are more dramatic than others. Beyond the standard rom-com style turmoil, we have all experienced drama of historic proportions during our elementary, middle, and high school years. School shootings, a hopeful presidency followed by a turbulent presidency, police brutality fueled by a broken system of racism, and- just in time for senior year- a worldwide pandemic! Through it all, this vibrant community has consistently provided an example of what to do when we don't know what to do... we reflect and we act, we reflect and we act. We believe things can get better.

The Sandy Hook school shooting was the first tragedy that I was old enough to understand. I was nine years old at the time and, while I understood what occurred, it was so difficult for me to wrap my head around how and why this happened to children two years younger than me. Denial was my only coping mechanism. In choir, we sang a choral version of "Sweet Child O' Mine" in memoriam of the victims. I remember holding back tears as we sang. I surveyed the congregation and saw the collective grieving and processing that we were leading. It was one of my first memories of how All Saints responds to tragedy. We came together, reflected, and mourned. By example, it taught me that taking action is crucial to healing.

As I got older, we were encouraged to act and support change. I went with other All Saints youth to the "March for our Lives" in Washington, D.C. We not only stood as allies alongside Parkland victims and their families, but met with our elected representatives. It was a full-circle and eye-opening education on how active faith can meet current events and help others.

Throughout history, there have been times when politicians have used Christianity to justify injustice, perpetuate crime, and exploit the vulnerable. The Parkland shooting happened because action wasn't taken after Sandy Hook, after Virginia Tech, after Red Lake, after Columbine. My own high school experienced gun-related security threats. Our society isn't reflecting and acting in a way to break the cycle. Christianity and quote-unquote "Christian values" have been used as a smoke screen by NRA-backed politicians to continue this unnecessary cycle of death. Religious nationalism fuels ideas like the one citing that the right to bear arms is by virtue of God's American covenant. It's the same ideology that was used to justify slavery, in turn, giving ground to racism. The common American Christian identity is dangerous and doesn't represent who the people of God are supposed to be.

All Saints' stance on these vital issues has served as an example to me on how to be loving and firmly countercultural in response to broken systems that need our voice. I had other great experiences as a part of choir, youth group, and the Mexico Transformational Journey. Another experience that was truly identity-forming was the Seekers confirmation class (shoutout to the Seeker's Class of 2018!), led by a key mentor and friend of my family and many other families, Jeremy Langil. On our retreat we had to work together to form a single shared creed that we all agreed with.

There's so much baggage to what it means to be a "Follower of God" (and some of us wouldn't even label ourselves in that way at all), that we wanted to avoid associations with things that were toxic. The creed exercise was a highlight and memorable couple of hours for all involved. There was some crying and arguing, (yep, I know, back to dramatic teenagers again) but it culminated in eventual bonding and agreement. The final version of the contested line reads, "God dwells in us and/or with us". We couldn't come to an agreement as to which conjunction to use, but either way, we agreed that whatever God represents to each of us, it is ever present in our lives. A source of hope, justice, love, and/or light.

At All Saints, those qualities of Jesus and God are used to sustain our contemplative response and fuel our outward action. We've especially needed these values during this past year. The pandemic interrupted daily life and in-person choir and youth group meetings. While we tried to fight it, we all had to deal with isolation, loneliness, and being tired of people in our homes.

Last Sunday, Ms. Jenny led us in our spring concert, which also involved senior goodbyes. We are the largest graduating group in Ms. Jenny's years and she still found time to thoughtfully prepare 12 individual letters. In the one she wrote to me, she talked about how I kept coming back. I moved, and I came back to choir. I got busy with sports, and I came back. I got busy with volunteering and other things, and I came back. And this week, I spent time thinking about how the invitation to come back is always here at All Saints. The door is always open. "Whoever you are and wherever you find yourself on your journey of faith, you're welcome here."

As I prepare to go away to college, I know that I always have a place at All Saints. Even at a distance, I can access that connection that brings me back. This home is embedded in me. Action and reflection is embedded in me. Thank you for investing in me, and being a part of my story, a story that doesn't end here. I'll think of my friends, my mentors, the dim chandlers, the angled backs of the pews, and the open arms that tell me I can always come home.