

# Saving a seat for a stranger

Mass is well underway, and we're comfortably settled in our pew for the first reading.

Suddenly a lady arriving in the church genuflects and slips into our pew. We scramble to grab our coats and shuffle to the side. There are only four of us, but we seem to take up so much space. We need to squeeze in a bit to give her a seat.

Then I look up and recognize her. She's not a stranger. She's a good friend, the mother of an elementary school classmate, someone I have known as long as I can remember. Our eyes meet, we both smile, and I give her a quick squeeze from the side. I whisper a quick introduction in our second-grader's ear so he'll know this newcomer is not a stranger, but a friend.

I'm so happy to see her, happy that of all the pews she could have picked as she hurried into the church on a chilly, damp day, she picked ours. The whole Mass takes on a different kind of glow - touched by friendship and companionship and being there together in song and prayer.

Our son sits happily beside this new friend, enthusiastically thrusts his hand into hers at the sign of peace, and treats her like the honored guest she clearly is.

As Mass continues and we walk toward the altar to receive the Eucharist, I find myself thinking of this community we are. Not one person in this church is really a stranger. I recognize many of the faces. Week after week, I see children growing up, though I may not know their names. I notice when the older gentleman who sits on that side misses a Sunday and hope he's not ill. I know the faces of the eucharistic ministers, the voices of the lectors, the cantor who welcomes the congregation with a special kind of warmth. I give my favorite greeter a hug.

But even those I don't know at all are members of the same body of Christ. We are one family, many branches of the same vine. We are all believers. We are all sinners seeking mercy and aspiring for heaven. And - I need to remind myself - we can support one another on this journey.

During the recessional hymn as I glance around at the people who are standing nearby, I think how much more I could do to build community. I'm not thinking in the forced please-greet-those-around-you way that's thrust on us at the beginning of Mass. That approach has never made me feel connected to those around me.

I even wince when we ask people to raise their hands to say they are visiting or new to the parish. If we are truly a community, shouldn't we recognize that they are newcomers?

No, when I think of being truly welcoming, I think of how I could greet everyone with the same genuine smile I offered my friend. And I wonder why I don't push myself to make room at the end of the pew. Do we really need to take up so much room? Could we move toward the center and make space for those who will come hurrying in later? How can I make room for others in my life and trust they will also give us the space we need to slip out if, say, a child suddenly needs to use the restroom?

It's easy for me to say that after Mass we are hurrying off to Sunday school classes, that we don't have time to make conversation. Our children are certainly ready to bound out of church by the end of Mass. But there may never be a better time to reach out to those around us and help them feel included and connected. If I don't think the stilted invitations from the altar are the way to build a welcoming community, then the burden - or the opportunity - to create that community rests with me. It rests, in fact, with each of us.

And maybe it doesn't need to be anything extraordinary. Maybe it's as simple as a smile and a hello - and room for a new friend to sit in our pew.