

Why I Love First Congregational Church
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I loved it last week when Andrea said that she was first attracted to this church by the food. It got to me thinking about what first attracted me – and I realized that, oddly enough, it was the look of the church the first time I visited. The look, by the way, wasn't at all like it is now. I think I would describe as charmingly eccentric.

If you haven't been here for at least 15 years, I should probably explain. So a tiny bit of history: once upon a time – my guess is that it had to have been the 60s, because, well, you know, the 60s – the church sanctuary had been refurbished.

The result – and please, I mean no offense to anyone who might have had something to do with it – was, uh, different. Those beautiful windows remained – all those subtle purples and pale greens, but rather oddly, the front of the sanctuary had been completely covered in what looked like old barn wood. Bright red rugs ran down each aisle, and the light fixtures were these modern things done in navy blue and red glass. And right up in front, over the altar, hung a really giant wooden cross. I remember thinking on my first visit that the wire that held it in place really didn't look quite big enough. I actually flinched when someone walked under it.

But there's more. As it happens, my first Sunday here was Pentecost 1997. I know this because in addition to what I've described, I remember that the balconies were hung with red and orange and gold banners, felt banners of course. And helium balloons in the same colors were tied to various things. I remember that a few had already escaped to the ceiling.

So, my first impression of First Congregational Church: I was in a sanctuary that looked for all the world like a modernist architect had had a ferocious brawl with a traditional

architect, and no one had really won, but they had decided to have a party anyway. The whole effect seemed to say that this church cared about something more than appearances. I loved it.

I probably should explain why I was here at all that Sunday. I had grown up in a religious family for whom church and faith was at the center of everything. I had gone to a parochial school through the eighth grade. But I had, almost a decade before that Pentecost, left the church of my childhood. It's not coincidental that I had left at one particular juncture in my life: at age 40, I had realized that I was gay. Let's just say that that particular fact was not a good fit with my old church. I could have stayed, I guess, but only if I decided to hide my real self.

For almost a decade after that, my daughters and I had "tried out" a number of denominations. Nothing had felt quite right. But on that particular Pentecost Sunday here, this funny thing happened: ten minutes into the service, this congregation "exchanged the peace." Honestly, it was almost alarming. I was used to that very quiet greeting of peace – you know, you turn awkwardly to your side or back and take someone's hand and mumble "peace by with you" in a whisper and then you sit down quickly. Well, you know what happens here. It happened then – and that moment was so big, so exuberant, so open, so accepting, that I was blown away. I remember sitting down, and my young teenage daughter turned to me, grinning, and said, "Mom, this is it. This is the one!"

It was. We stayed. And little by little, I came to believe that I could be exactly whom I was in this church. About two years after I had joined, there occurred an event that let me know that my hopeful feeling was true. Our old minister had left and this congregation decided to call a minister who fit exactly what we said we were looking for. He also happened to be openly gay, something that was, twenty years ago, a pretty big deal. What ensued was, in truth, a searing experience because that call was not

universally supported. I did know that the great majority of the members not only supported that call but were enthusiastic about it, but still I remember how painful it was to listen to the opponents in what seemed like an endless series of conversations about the choice. I know that at some point I just wanted to lie low and, you know, let the straight people work it out. But here's the point: the congregation did work it out. And it did so with a beautiful and straightforward set of propositions. They went like this:

1. *We have called a wonderful minister.*
2. *We believe that God embraces all human beings.*
3. *We believe with all our hearts in God's extravagant welcome. And so,*
4. *Do we mean it or not?*

This church meant it. This church still means it; in so many ways since that time, it has shown that it wants to enact this message of extravagant welcome.

This church wears its heart, not on its sleeve, but in its actions. And that's what I love about First Congregational Church.