

How did I end up at South Yarra Baptist?

OR

How knitting became my hobby.

A story reflecting on Matthew 11:25-30 by Liesl Filippi

A quick online search gave me the following definitions for 'hobby': From the Oxford dictionary: An activity done regularly in one's leisure time for pleasure. From Merriam-webster: a pursuit outside one's regular occupation engaged in especially for relaxation.

What does a hobby, or rather in my case the lack of a hobby, have to do with my faith journey? Not a lot actually, but it does give an example of my personality and approach to life. You see the concept of a hobby was ridiculous to me until fairly recently. My approach to everything is usually extreme. If something is worth doing, it is worth doing entirely, as an occupation, a vocation, as work and leisure, all or nothing, all consuming.

From my teenage years this extreme approach to life was active in the two aspects of life that I devoted myself and all my time to, music and following Jesus.

The most outwardly obvious was music. I began learning the flute at age 12 and within months was planning a career as a professional musician. Throughout high school I was heavily involved in the music program. I also played percussion, clarinet and saxophone. At various times, I played in the junior concert band, intermediate concert band, senior concert band, stage band, flute ensemble, woodwind ensemble, percussion ensemble, clarinet ensemble, a regional concert band, a regional orchestra and church orchestra. I was active in many of these ensembles at the same time, which meant that I was playing and rehearsing a lot, but I didn't fit in enough individual practise time. Never the less, flute was my first love and in year 12 I gained both grade 7 and 8 exam certificates. I also started teaching private flute students when I was 16. I went on to complete a music degree, spent a year in Canberra for further study and moved to England after meeting a teacher at a summer school. During all this time I was pursuing a career as a professional orchestral performer, specifically, I wanted the principal piccolo chair in the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, the second flute chair would have been fine too. I took whatever opportunities I could to play in orchestras and shows, do auditions, solo and duet concerts. I was also teaching at several schools and privately so as to earn money.

Though perhaps not so obvious, I was equally committed to following Jesus. I was born into a 'Christian family'. My parents were Seventh Day Adventists. Their own faith journey led them through various faith and worshipping communities until they settled at a large pentecostal church. This coincided with my beginning high school at age 12. My parents version of Christianity had been impressed upon me from birth and I grew up believing that I was 'saved' and would go to heaven, and that I needed to help other people get saved too. Despite believing I was saved, I was a bit confused at not having had a conversion experience. At age 13 I was baptised and hoped that would cover all bases. My decision to be baptised came from a genuine commitment to follow Jesus and I wanted to do that the best I could. So I hoped to become a pastor's wife, not realising at that time that women could be pastors. Through my teenage years, I was heavily involved in church activities. Two Sunday services, a mid-week service, youth group, my parents' home group, my youth home group, and I was a youth group leader. While at uni I was part of a group that began an outreach church.

Although my description of God at that time would have suggested otherwise, I now see that my experience and understanding of God and Christianity was rule based, with definite answers, striving to be good, and confusion as to why my huge efforts where not being rewarded with the outcomes I expected. I now see my understanding of God at that time as quite destructive. But I

must have had an unconscious belief that there was more to this 'loving' God, and in my extreme way, I kept searching.

I have no idea how I thought being a pastor's wife was compatible with being a professional musician. I just kept working 120% at both areas of my life.

Is it any wonder I didn't have a hobby? There was hardly any time left for sleeping, let alone leisure time. I think this was an unreasonable level of activity for me and contributed to the chronic fatigue syndrome that I have battled with since my early 20's. I also live with depression and anxiety, which has been better or worse at various times. Many times I cried out to God for the rest that Jesus offered, but seemed unable to realise it. My commitment was genuine, but I was not living authentically.

But back to the hobby, or lack of one.

In my mid 20's I still had no time for a hobby because I moved to Bath in England to study flute and had to work to cover my expenses. I still made the effort to go to church as I understood that to be an important way of living my commitment to Jesus. Bath Abbey was really my only option as I could walk there. I also made friends there.

It was at this point that my world began to shift, which is a positive way of saying my world fell apart. It was gradual at first. Bath Abbey was not my idea of an alive, spirit filled church, but I persisted as it was my only option. After many months, to my shock and horror, I realised that I was enjoying the traditional, prayerbook style services. I loved the quietness, repetitiveness and predicability. I found the hymns without clapping and hand raising much less draining.

Musically, despite significant progress in my flute playing, I was no longer so certain I could achieve the career I had wanted. I needed a time to reevaluate.

From the people I was house sharing with, I was introduced to the Northumbria Community. The concept of a lay monastic community made no sense to me whatsoever, but I decided to visit the community's motherhouse in Northumberland for a retreat, another concept that was foreign to me. Now things moved more quickly. The moment I arrived I felt like I had come home. I realised that this was a place I could have the time I needed to think and pray. I spoke to some of the leaders and they agreed that I could come to live and work at the motherhouse, which I did for almost a year. Words cannot adequately describe what this time was for me. I believe it was a 'dark night of the soul' experience, but that was understood and supported. I was in a safe place where I was accepted for who I was. With people who were beautiful, loving, broken, and seeking to live authentically as followers of Jesus. My success or otherwise as a musician was irrelevant. For the first time I began to understand what it meant to be good enough just for being me, all of me, even the hard bits. I became familiar with ideas such as 'living the questions', 'journey of the heart', 'relationship before reputation' and 'the heretical imperative'. I was introduced to the Celtic saints and the desert mothers and fathers, the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Henri Nouwen, Thomas Merton and Jean Vanier. I was in a place where Christianity was lived out in the context of everyday life. Bit by bit, every aspect of my understanding of God, Jesus and Christianity was questioned, a process which is continuing.

I no longer thought being a pastor's wife was the ultimate calling for a Christian woman. Now, I quite seriously wondered whether being totally committed to God meant I should become a nun.

By the time I returned to Australia, I knew for certain that I would not settle back in the church my family still attended. Thanks be to God, I had been given a contact here at South Yarra. From the moment I walked in the door, I knew this was a place I belonged. There were the icons and candles that I had discovered at Northumbria. There was the prayerbook liturgy. I realised very quickly that I had found another place where I was good enough just because I was me. Here I

am able to worship and grow in my Christianity with others who are beautiful, loving, broken and seeking to live authentically as followers of Jesus, just like me. A safe place to ask and live the questions.

And so this story of how I ended up at South Yarra, is a story of change in how I understood and knew God. I even think this is for me, a conversion experience. My conversion from belief in a harsh and confusing god, to a God revealed in Jesus the Christ who says:

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

As good as this sounds, I am still learning what it means and how to live it. This community has been vital to me as my journey has continued. The support and love I feel here has been God’s love, which has sustained me through ongoing health challenges, and a parenting journey that includes baby Greta who was stillborn, and Tara being born 8 weeks premature.

I can’t say my life is smooth, it’s complicated and I still have many struggles and questions, I still tend to go to extremes in ways not entirely healthy. But I believe my journey, which brought me to South Yarra and continues with you here, has brought me to a place where I have begun to know the rest that Jesus offers. I don’t experience that rest as having an easy life in the way that easy is usually understood in our culture. But in the moments of feeling the ‘rightness’ of living authentically, I do feel less burdened. I feel that the parts of my life have some sense of integration now, at least some of the time. And one result of my gaining a more authentic and balanced life is that I do now have a hobby. I still don’t find much spare time for leisure, what I do get is often facilitated by Play School. But in the time I do find, I enjoy knitting and crochet. I don’t try to be professional at it or use the skills to earn money. I do it for pleasure and relaxation. I have a hobby.

And that’s how I ended up at South Yarra and how knitting became my hobby.