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Jesus Lives, but Should He Live in My Front Yard?

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Abstract

As I drove home from church, I eyed the bright foam sign my 6-year-old daughter held. “Jesus is Alive” it read in kid scrawl. “We’re supposed to put them in our yards!” Noelle beamed, eyeing her creation proudly through pink-rimmed glasses.

I imagined our wide, open yard in Pennsylvania, the green grass stretching without fences from one neighbor to the next. Our best friends in the neighborhood, secular humanists, would easily see it. I cringed. What would they think? [*excerpt*]

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By Christin Taylor

April 5, 2014 10:47 pm

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I imagined our wide, open yard in Pennsylvania, the green grass stretching without fences from one neighbor to the next. Our best friends in the neighborhood, secular humanists, would easily see it. I cringed. What would they think?

While Dwayne and I have never sought to conceal our faith — anyone who spends more than a couple of evenings with us will find out we’re Christians — we also don’t talk openly or easily about our backgrounds as missionary kids raised in the evangelical church.

We both work in higher education and run in circles that are highly educated and liberal. In our community, intellect is the only viable form of religion, and the fact that I’m a Christian calls into question my intellectual grit. When my colleagues find out, they are hard-pressed to reconcile the bright, open woman they see before them with the stereotypes they understand about evangelicals. You know the ones: judgmental, anti-intellectual, homophobic, which we are not.

We are the types of young adult Christians who love our faith, but who've moved slightly left of center. Just enough so that we have to keep our social and political views quiet in our faith communities. On the other hand, we have to tamp down the religious talk in our work and social communities. I am constantly negotiating how much of myself to share in either group.

Nothing embodies the tension I feel around integrating my identity into both these communities like Noelle's first explorations with faith. She is extroverted and vocal in ways I am not brave enough to be. She is unselfconscious — completely unaware of the stereotypes that linger around conservative faith.

As I pulled the car into the driveway, I thought about when we had one of our favorite families over for dinner a few nights before. Dwayne and I had immediately connected with Brad and Jen because they'd moved from San Francisco. We'd spent seven years in L.A. (another place not exactly jumping for joy over evangelicals).

While we'd talked about the West Coast and ate our black bean soup, Noelle's sweet voice suddenly rang out above the racket. "Wait! We forgot to pray!"

I felt Jen stiffen beside me. Jen grew up without any kind of religion, and she and Brad raise their children similarly — without religious beliefs.

There I sat: perched between not wanting to make our guests feel uncomfortable, but also not wanting to squash the tender shoots of Noelle's faith. She beamed up at me, proud to have remembered something as important as prayer.

"O.K.," I'd said to Noelle. "You pray." It's hard to judge a cute little girl praying.

But it's also risky letting her pray because she likes to insert Bible lessons — lessons I'd never tell non-Christian friends. Such as: "Thank you, Jesus, for coming down from heaven and dying on the cross for our sins." Or better yet, "Thank you, Jesus, for your blood that has washed us white as snow."

Please God, I pleaded. Don't let her say anything embarrassing.

Everyone sat quietly and Noelle proceeded.

"Dear Jesus, thank you for our friends and that they could have dinner with us tonight. Please bless this food to our bodies. Amen."

Jen smiled at me and took another bite of her soup. Crisis averted.

Now, after church, as we bundled out of the car and went into the house, my 2-year-old son grasped my hand as he toddled up the steps.

"Where's Noelle?" Dwayne asked when we got inside.

I looked back to see her squatting over the garden, pressing her sign into the freshly thawed earth.

"She's putting up her 'Jesus is Alive' sign," I answered. We looked at each other knowingly and then chuckled.

I decided to let her keep it up.

In the end, living in our neighborhood and working at our liberal, intellectual jobs has cultivated in me another kind of faith: faith in the graciousness and kindness of my friends and co-workers. They know who we are, what we believe, and they accept us just as we are. Perhaps, Noelle has understood this all along.

Christin Taylor is the author of "Shipwrecked in LA," about the faith shipwreck she hit while working in Hollywood during her twenties. She

teaches writing at Gettysburg College in Gettysburg, PA where she lives with her husband and two kids, Noelle (6) and Nathan (2). You can read more of her writing at www.christintaylor.com, and follow her on twitter @shipwreckedinla.

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